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THE TWO FALLS OF ROME IN LATE ANTIQUITY

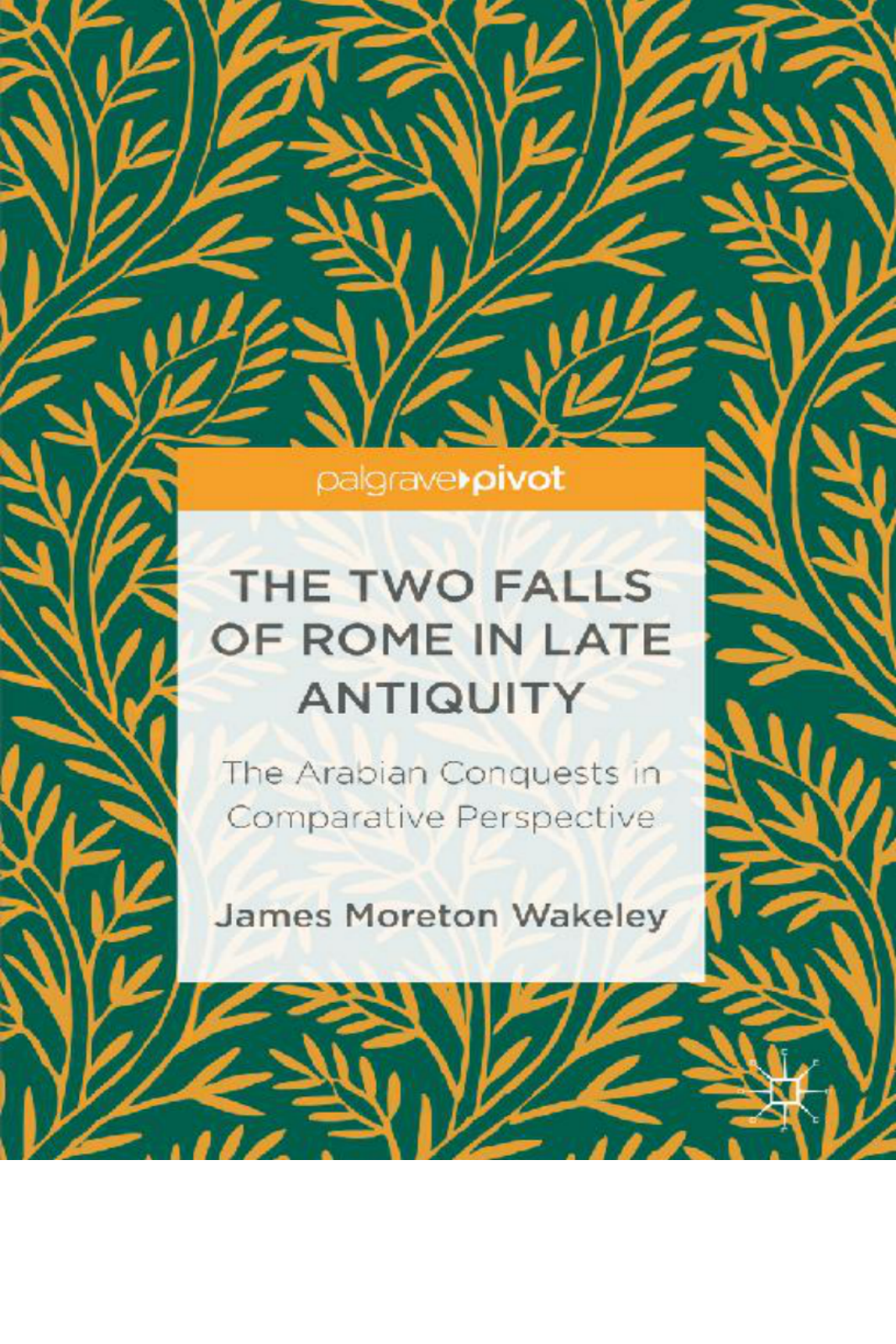
The Arabian Conquests in
Comparative Perspective

James Moreton Wakeley



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1. A Sibling Rivalry

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Abstract

The introductory chapter begins by demonstrating the enduring potency of medieval histories written by Muslims about what are conventionally called the Islamic Conquests of the seventh century. They have inspired ISIS and are an integral part of modern fundamentalist philosophies. Attention then turns to what this has to do with the Roman Empire. It is argued that the world into which Islam erupted should not be seen as separate from the Rome with which modern westerners habitually identify, and that such a broader perspective is integral to the period now known as Late Antiquity. The contents and essential arguments of the following chapters are then set out. The chapter ends by suggesting that many of the men who remade the ancient world in the image of God and his messenger Muḥammad may not, in fact, have realised that is what they were doing.

Keywords9/11ISISRomeLate Antiquity

Few who were alive in the autumn of 2001 can forget where they were when the planes ploughed into the World Trade Center's Twin Towers. I vividly remember arriving home from school on a wet September afternoon only to be told of the disaster by a distraught mother tearfully watching the news, uncertain as to what this act of declamatory terror meant for the future. In an instant, the Western world woke up to the fact that this age is not the end of history, that 'they hate us', and that the eternal peace and prosperity seemingly heralded by the collapse of the Berlin Wall was nothing but a dream banished at the dawn of a new age of Middle Eastern wars and attacks on the streets of cities, whose inhabitants thought the blast of bombs or the rattle of rifle fire would resonate only in their grandparents'

memories, not in their own ears.

The 9/11 Commission established by the American Congress and President George W. Bush not only came to pinpoint the failures in America's own internal security that, if earlier identified, could have prevented the attacks, it also uncovered what it called 'The Foundation of the New Terrorism'.¹ Besides a brief history of al-Qaeda, the report touched upon one of the intellectual godfathers of modern Islamism, Sayyid Qutb.² Qutb was a cultured Egyptian familiar with the West and its ways, who only really turned to Islam once he became disillusioned with Arab nationalism, an ideological *volte face* that eventually led to his execution for treason by President Nasser in 1966. His most influential tract, *Milestones*, is nothing less than a manifesto for radical change across the Muslim world, the initial focus of his disciples' efforts before they turned their attention to the Western 'far enemy'.³ It demands that all secular authorities be violently deposed, on the basis that they have committed the gravest of sins by raising the rule of man above the law of God. All who adhere to such authorities, though they may think and act otherwise, cannot be considered true Muslims. They are tantamount to the enemies of the prophet Muḥammad who, in the conventional interpretation of the Qur'ān, worshipped idols rather than the one true God, making it merely a pious duty to 'fight them until there is no more persecution, and all worship is devoted to God alone' (Q. 8:39).⁴ In its exhortations to impose Islamic law by force and its uncompromising attitude towards all who fail to agree with its programme, *Milestones* deserves the status of the real holy book of the most recent and most chillingly brutal manifestation of Islamism: ISIS.

Qutb did not only draw on the Qur'ān to justify what some critical assessments of his work have identified as an ideology as dependent on Bolshevism as it is on anything else.⁵ He also delved into the pages of Islamic history to summon inspiring illustrations of the righteous and violent deeds of the founders of the early medieval Islamic Empire to offer modern Muslims models of putatively correct conduct. One example in particular captures the militant piety Qutb sought to stir in his followers.

God has sent us to bring anyone who wishes from servitude to men into the service of God alone, from the narrowness of this world into the vastness of this world and the Hereafter, and from the tyranny of religions into the justice of Islam. God raised a Messenger for this purpose to teach His creatures His way. If anyone accepts this way of life, we turn back and give his country back to him, and we fight with those who rebel until we are martyred or become victorious. (Sayyid

Qutb gives no reference for this passage, but it seems to be taken from the *History of the Prophets and Kings* of Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, which was likely composed in the late ninth or early tenth centuries AD.⁶ It is the response given by a Muslim warrior to a Persian general, who is in the process of interrogating him at some point before the decisive battle of al-Qādisiyyah , in which the armies of Persia were all but obliterated by the new power that had arisen in Arabia. The message is clear. The enemies of the new religion of Islam are to convert or die. The Muslim warrior speaks with a blithe assurance bred from the knowledge that God is on his side, and that his victory is inevitable.

What, however, does Sayyid Qutb , Islamism, and the ostensible words of a seventh-century forbear of ISIS have to do with the fall , or falls, of Rome? West Europeans, it is fair to say, tend to see Rome as their own. The Classical World , of which the Roman Empire represents the zenith, is thought to have given us the intellectual seeds of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, together with an inspiration to material achievement unmatched until the eighteenth-century rebirth of rational thought was underway. Studying Classics at one of the most ancient universities in the world can still lead to the cultivation of such an impression. Pushing the chronological boundaries beyond the empire of the Antonines and Severans, however, starts to give one reason to question this conceit.

Rather than finding oneself moving into the gloom of the Dark Ages as Roman power wanes, one discovers that the centuries after the first Christian Emperor Constantine were ones of striking cultural innovation and development.⁷ Our moral world, far from originating in the airy ambulatories of a classical temple or in Plato, starts to emerge in the intricate and often mind-numbing debates of the Church Fathers, which helped to make a minor cult the world's largest religion. The outline of the political fabric of medieval and modern Europe, moreover, can start to be seen in the so-called barbarian kingdoms that succeeded the West Roman Empire in the fifth century. The Emperor Justinian's Hagia Sophia in the New Rome built on the Bosphorus to mark the advent of a new age makes the Pantheon or any other monument raised in the old capital look like a parish church compared to St Paul's Cathedral. Late Antiquity , as the centuries from Constantine to Charlemagne tend now to be called, was anything but an age of decay or of murky insignificance.

There are, therefore, few if any who today would accept the once dominant picture of the later Roman and early post-Roman centuries as an age of unmitigated decline in all spheres of human existence.

Ever more intense study of Late Antiquity has not only questioned and discarded old assumptions that used to pervade the field, but has also offered insights of profound significance for human civilisation in a broader sense. What makes empires rise and fall, if indeed they grow and wither like a living organism? Are the 'orthodox' beliefs and practices of a later age really the pure progeny of an earlier movement? What is a 'nation', and are nations inherently more legitimate than any other form of human organisation?

Recent years have seen Late Antiquity embrace a more specific subject: Islam. It is now impossible seriously to think that European Christendom's ancestral opponent arose from a source wholly alien to the origins of our own civilisation, sharing only a vague Abrahamic heritage. The rivalry between the two worlds, at root at least, has more of the sibling to it than both sides have ever liked to admit. It is indeed more accurate even to consider Islam the culmination, rather than the reversal, of a number of Late Antiquity's cardinal phenomena.⁸ Yet the precise nature of the origin of Islam and the first decades of a society that would become recognisably Islamic, by the standards of its classical manifestation, is far from clear. Entirely divergent explanations have come into being for the inspiration of Muḥammad's prophecy, for his very nature, geographical location, and original significance, let alone the extent to which the outline of the first century of Islam as given in the later written Islamic tradition is accurate.

First, it is worth saying what the present short study does not attempt to do, given the deeply contestable obscurity of the source material and the complex, occasionally impassioned analyses it has provoked. This is certainly not an attempt to rewrite the origins of Islam. It is neither by any means a definitive study of an area that has shown itself to unearth ever more intriguing source material as the horizons of linguistic and disciplinary boundaries expand, or of many of the arguments provoked by it. Rather, the present study seeks to ask a number of strikingly neglected questions to challenge a number of trends evident within secondary scholarship, which trace themselves to what can often seem to be the dominant messages of the primary sources. These also tend to be the messages, incidentally, selected by men like Sayyid Qutb and his followers, which cry out for critical questioning. Sections of the *History of the Prophets and Kings* by al-Ṭabarī that deal with the lead-up to the most important defeats of Rome and Persia, Yarmouk and al-Qādisiyyah, have been selected for close analysis in order to perform this task most effectively. Secondary scholars have placed considerable weight on the *History* and al-Ṭabarī offers more detail than the other master narrative of the fifth-century conquests, the *Book of the Conquest of the Lands* by al-Balādhurī.

Greek and Latin sources are also crucial.

Above all, the current study tries to harness insights from the detailed and sociologically complex historiography associated with scholarship on the Germanic migrations of the fifth century to re-analyse the Arabian conquests of the seventh century. This approach may strike some more conventional students of early Islam as bordering upon the radical, even in light of what could be termed the late antiquarian turn witnessed in Islamic studies over recent years. It is equally striking, however, to anyone coming from the earlier centuries of Late Antiquity to Islam that the false boundaries of scholarly disciplines have led to sources and historical phenomena sharing many similarities being interpreted in different ways. This tendency cries out for the rejection of artificial academic borders in order to try to view what was essentially the seventh-century fall of Rome in the East in the same manner as we assess and analyse the fifth-century fall of Rome in the West.

Chapter 2 consequently explores the divergent nature of reconstructions of the two conquest periods, thereby demonstrating the extent to which the fifth century has been the subject of far more detailed and innovative analysis. Chapter 3 argues that this divergence can, at least in part, be attributed to the nature of the Islamic historical tradition as well as to the fact that different groups of scholars have tended to read different selections of sources. It then acknowledges the profound source problems inherent within this tradition, before suggesting comparative analysis as a new touchstone of plausibility to help to strike a middle way between total acceptance and complete denial of the tradition's historical veracity.

Chapter 4 nonetheless proposes that sources like al-Ṭabarī's *History* are in some respects texts of identity analogous to the western *origo gentis* tradition. They are not, as it might suit groups like ISIS to think, simple accounts of what actually happened. They should therefore be read with care, but they contain genuine historical allusions, as will be argued in Chap. 5. Chapter 6 further pursues the comparative perspective to make the case that the success of the Arabian conquests of the seventh century should be placed squarely in the imperial frontier, through a maximalist interpretation of the importance of Rome's Arabian clients.

Terminology is an issue of profound importance throughout. A deliberate choice was eventually made to refer to the conquests as 'Arabian', rather than to use the more frequently encountered terms 'Arab' or 'Islamic'. This is primarily because the most recent research in the field has cast considerable doubt on the notion that a critical mass of the inhabitants of the peninsula could have described themselves as 'Arabs' until the heyday of Islam, despite the ancient

pedigree of the term 'Arab' itself. Peter Webb's provocative yet magisterial recent study on the construction of medieval Arab identity has undermined what evidence there was for the use of the term in Late Antiquity, even if it is attested as some kind of ethnonym in earlier ages.⁹ He even comes to the novel conclusion that 'Arab ethnogenesis is the process by which early Muslim elites in the post-conquest Middle East constructed a sense of kinship from the foundations of the new puritanical community of co-religionists after Muhammad'.¹⁰ This is an intriguing suggestion that deserves far greater attention than could have been possible here, especially since the overwhelming majority of what follows was written before Webb's book was published. His arguments have a direct impact on what the seventh-century conquerors should be called, as well as on the nature of the early Islamic Empire, but it should be said at the outset that the social and political phenomena discussed in this book, not least in Chap. 6, remain as applicable to more loosely defined groups of 'Arabians' as they would have been to 'Arabs'.

Other ill-defined terms to describe the conquerors, like 'the invading army' are also used deliberately and are purposefully vague. Formulations like the 'imperial frontier' are used with reference to the border lands of both the Roman and the Sasanian empires, when it is possible to talk of general phenomena. Most terminological and other translations are my own, unless otherwise stated, but use has been made of existing translations and commentaries, which are credited in the endnotes, when appropriate.

This book is essentially a short historical study whose origin lies in a perhaps somewhat unconventional M.Phil. thesis submitted at the University of Oxford in 2015. It has been selectively updated and revised, but remains substantially what it was. It was not written as a reply to the abuse of history by Islamists. It rather grew out of a twin fascination with the fall of the Roman West and the excitement of delving into a new language and discipline. Given that the threat of Islamist terror has become the dominant foreign and domestic security concern of the age, however, no apologies need to be made for hinting how critical analysis of the seventh-century conquests can inform current concerns, even though what follows is of far more interest to students of Late Antiquity than to those seeking to understand contemporary Islamism. Shining a light on the past, needless to say, can often lead to helpful reflections on the present. Scholarship should always try to look beyond the ivory towers, lest those towers start to crumble into irrelevance.

Finally, this study tries to put at the forefront of history the men who remade the ancient world in the seventh century in the name of God and his Messenger. Whether many of them knew that this was

exactly what they were doing, however, is not quite clear...

Footnotes

1

T. H. Kean and L. Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004) 47–70.

2

Ibid., p. 51.

3

S. Qutb, *Milestones* (Islamic Book Service: New Delhi, 2002); originally published by the author in Arabic as *Ma'ālim fi al-tarīq* in 1964.

4

Qutb quotes this verse of the Qur'ān as part of his chapter on the necessity of Holy War. Qutb, *Milestones*, 69–70.

5

For an intelligent deconstruction of Qutb's intellectual heritage, see J. Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (Hurst & Co.: London, 2010) for example 15–20.

6

For perhaps the most probable episode in al-Ṭabarī that Qutb paraphrases, see M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, Vol. I.V (Brill, 1879–1901) 2271 (the wording is similar and the message and characters involved are the same). Heroic exertions by several leading Arabists over recent years have resulted in the complete translation of al-Ṭabarī's great work of history. Qutb's inspiration can therefore now be read in English, in Y. Friedmann, trans., *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume XII – The Battle of al-Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine* (New York, 1992) 67.

7

The career of one man, above all others, has been responsible for this positive repackaging of the later Roman World: Peter Brown. See as a starting point his programmatic study, P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150–750* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1971).

8

This thesis is explicitly and persuasively set out by G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*:

9

P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016). See 66–96 for a deconstruction of the evidence for the use of the term ‘Arab’ in pre-Islamic poetry and for an alternative history of the initial appearance of the term.

10

Ibid., 138.

2. The Two Falls of Rome in Late Antiquity

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Abstract

The second chapter opens by arguing that it is wrong to speak of the ‘fall’ of Rome. Rome, in effect, fell twice in Late Antiquity, once in the fifth century in the West and then again in the seventh century in the Near East. Both of these phases of imperial collapse were caused by the action of hostile invaders. The chapter then explores how surprising it is that, given this apparent causal similarity, the historiography of the two phases of imperial denouement has conventionally been so divergent. Methods of interpreting both the fifth- and seventh-century conquests are consequently summarised and discussed. Despite recent developments in the study of the seventh century and of early Islam, the chapter closes by showing that traditional interpretations remain entrenched within modern historiography, calling for a new methodological approach to the Islamic sources.

KeywordsInvasionBarbarianIdentityTransformationFanaticism

The whole period extends from the age of Trajan and the Antonines to the taking of Constantinople by Mahomet the Second.... (Edward Gibbon , *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, xi)¹

The fall of Rome exerts an enduring fascination. For European rulers since Charlemagne , and for their American progeny, Rome has stood as the paradigmatic imperial power, whose fall after centuries of unrivalled dominance reveals how nemesis can indeed follow hubris. Yet, ever since Edward Gibbon set out to describe ‘the memorable

series of revolutions, which, in the course of about thirteen centuries, gradually undermined, and at length destroyed, the solid fabric of human greatness', it has been apparent that speaking of a single 'fall' of Rome—as many do—should be impossible.²

Gibbon's thirteen centuries witnessed political and cultural transformations that were as various as they were profound. It is not necessary, however, to extend the Roman story to 1453 to show how the political collapse of the Western Empire in 476 was but one episode in a broader, Eurasian history of imperial transformation. Rome fell twice in Late Antiquity: a result of the crisis of the Eastern Empire in the seventh century as well as of the western implosion in the fifth.³

That one Roman Empire had indeed politically collapsed by the time of the forced abdication of its last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, should not be doubted. What was once a unified realm stretching from Hadrian's Wall to North Africa and the mountains of Illyria had fractured into a series of competing kingdoms. Land previously held by indigenous elites or by the imperial treasury had passed into the hands of new masters, who traced their descent to peoples hailing from beyond the old Roman frontier, the *limes*. Parts of the empire even experienced economic recession so severe that standards of living regressed to prehistoric levels.⁴

If there is little reason to doubt the fall of the Roman West, similar confidence should be deployed at describing the impact of the crisis of the seventh century as causing, in effect, the fall of the Roman East. Just as the Germanic invasions—a term requiring considerable qualification—transformed the Roman West, so the Arabian conquests of the Roman Near East had a revolutionary impact on the East Roman state and its people. The empire may have endured in Anatolia and in the greater Aegean world, but it was a mere echo of its former self: 'a medium sized regional state based on Constantinople'.⁵ Similar political and social changes to those experienced in the transition from unitary empire to mosaic of successor kingdoms in the West are evident. The sharp distinction between military and civilian power was lost, as provincial administration became progressively monopolised by the generals, the *stratēgoi*, of the new militarised provinces, the themes. Imperial administration became concentrated in the hands of the officials of the private household of the emperor in Constantinople. The complex administrative framework of the empire of Diocletian and Constantine, which had done so much to stratify the elite as well as to order and control the people and territory of the late antique empire, was no more.⁶

By the start of the eighth century, therefore, what had once been a unified Eurasian, pan-Mediterranean Roman world had, in important

respects, been transformed as dramatically in the East as it had been two centuries earlier in the West. The proximate causes of this transformation were, superficially, the same. Both the Western and Eastern Roman Empires were invaded by barbarians from outside of the empire: groups conventionally coming under the problematic catch-all names of Germans and Arabs. One would, as a consequence, surely expect comparative research between the two conquest periods to be common. Yet one would be mistaken.

Invaders of West and East: Divergent Historiographies

The West

Equating the tribes of the lands beyond the Rhine and the Danube with the Arabians who apparently brought Islam out of the desert, until very recently, would have confounded specialist scholars in both fields. The two conquest periods have conventionally been treated with little reference to the other. This is perhaps largely explained by the different academic disciplines into which the two periods fall—Classics or early medieval European history versus Byzantine and Islamic studies, with their different linguistic demands—as well as by the dissimilar geographic contexts and chronological spans, which, at first sight, may make easy comparisons seem facile.

The historiography of the fall of the Roman West can be divided into two camps, if generations of scholarship that looked for the causes of Rome's fall in a sorry tale of long-term decline are discounted. A large number of current, as well as of earlier scholars, emphasise the role of migration and of the bloody military conquest of the empire by foreign peoples: the Germanic barbarians. For some, this story begins with the crossing of Gothic groups into the empire in 376 and the abject defeat of the Eastern Roman field army at their hands at Adrianople two years later.⁷ The significance of this battle—in which the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus claims 'Bellona...raged more monstrously than usual against the Romans' (*History*, 31.13.1)⁸—arguably became clear in 382, when the empire was forced to recognise *de facto* Gothic suzerainty over large tracts of her Balkan provinces.⁹ This treaty is seen as the first in a number of 'agreements' that mark the progressive occupation of imperial territory by alien tribes that demonstrate how the balance of power shifted inexorably against Rome.

Many scholars, however, are at pains to break down this montage of invasion into different, stand-alone scenes, fully allowing for the possibility of Roman recovery to be built into the plot. Teleology is

often consciously rejected. There nevertheless seems to be a general consensus that the years after the failure to retake North Africa in 468—or even after the initial loss of what was the economic powerhouse of the Roman West in 439—were little more than the coda to total collapse.¹⁰ In short, many conclude that Roman civilisation did not just die, but was assassinated.¹¹

Yet there is another school of historiography on the fall of the Roman West—perhaps now dominant—that would argue that the author of this aphorism, André Piganiol, was writing more about the twentieth century than the fifth. Piganiol's epithet has even been reversed entirely. In an important introduction to the subject that is likely to remain the standard undergraduate textbook for some time, the author writes that Rome did not perish on the swords of conquerors, but simply 'accidentally committed suicide'.¹²

There are several shades to the approaches to the fall of the West that seek to minimise the impact of invasion and to contextualise it against patterns of internal change. It has even been argued that the entry of barbarian peoples into the empire was little more than the product of a new policy of frontier defence, and that the eventual breakdown of the West was an aim pursued by parochial Easterners at the court of Constantinople.¹³ The contentious case that the Roman Empire reformed the West out of existence has received less adherence than sociological analyses that have stressed the largely internal evolution of new identities within what were steadily becoming former Roman provinces. Scholarship on Roman Gaul, for instance, is dominated by an emphasis on the putatively voluntary drift of its elites out of the empire and into a new world. The titles of influential essay collections concerning themselves with late antique Gaul are revealing: *Fifth Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* is less a genuine question, more a mission statement for many of its authors.¹⁴ The introduction to another volume, containing work by many of the same scholars, sets out this approach in a way that leaves little room for violent invasion. The fall of the Roman West apparently 'took place in a natural, organic, and generally eirenic manner'.¹⁵

One does not, however, have to challenge the invasion hypothesis so resolutely to develop an appreciation of the complex social dynamics that underscored the eclipse of Roman power in the West. The elite authors who can dominate modern views of the period—and who had a deep, philosophical sense of loyalty to Rome¹⁶—did not speak for the wider society in which they lived, if one can even talk in such unitary terms.¹⁷ The application of two theoretical approaches to the transformation of the Roman world has done much to deepen scholarship's understanding of the crucial nuances of the fifth-century invasions. Frontier studies, which stresses the role of borderlands as

zones of interaction rather than division and in which the equation of cultural and social identity with lines on a map is said to be a construction of the nineteenth century, has done much to highlight the importance of internal cultural change on the empire's periphery in understanding the nature and reception of the invasions.

Such an analysis of the later Roman Empire shares its stress on the importance of identity with the post-1945 sociological approach to the history of the 'Germanic' peoples associated with a string of academics based at the University of Vienna. The publication of *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* by Reinhard Wenskus in 1961 started to shine a light on the disparate elements, which comprised the complex compounds that were what Anglophone scholarship tends still to call the Germanic tribes.¹⁸

Ethnic identity was shown to be extremely flexible, and a construct that formed around a relatively small core of successful warriors. The actual number of people who migrated into any given area to cause the genesis of a new ethnicity did not, therefore, have to be especially large. Later generations, in various ways and to differing extents, have followed Wenskus' lead to dismantle the notion that any of the peoples who succeeded Rome on the stage of European history had a primordial and unitary origin.¹⁹

According to this broad school of thought, warfare plays a crucial role as the catalyst underpinning the evolution of new identities and the dissolution of old. The Gothic wars in the Balkans of the later fourth century are often cited as a telling case in point. Ammianus Marcellinus makes it clear that the survival of the Goths who had revolted after being received into the empire in 376 was made possible, in no small measure, by provincials who joined and supplied them. He identifies at least four different groups, of the kind commonly found along the frontier, who aided the invading Goths. Members of the same people who had previously been taken into the empire as slaves and settled in the Balkans joined them, alongside Goths who had been sold into slavery during the logistical crisis that pushed their countrymen into revolt after they had crossed the Danube (*History*, 31.6.5).²⁰

Perhaps more significantly, the Goths were joined by others whom Ammianus does not describe as 'from the same people'. Local gold miners, 'no longer able to bear the heavy burden of taxes', were taken in by the Goths and gladly welcomed (31.6.6). Gothic manpower was also reinforced by an unknowable number of deserters from the Roman army (31.7.7). The easy readiness with which 'Romans' attach themselves to the Goths —revealed not least in the fact that Ammianus does not feel the need to digress on how such groups struggled with 'barbarian' ways or could not speak the language—

implies, at the very least, a low degree of ethnic disparity.

It has also been highlighted that Roman soldiers are elsewhere recorded as evolving into something close to a barbarian people, showing that Ammianus' account is not unusual. It is possible to catch a glimpse of this phenomenon in the few scattered and ghostly references there are to the West Roman army of the fifth century. The sixth-century Romano-Gothic author Jordanes, in his list of the contingents that fought in the mixed Roman and Gothic army against Attila the Hun at the Catalaunian Plains in 451, describes the mysterious Olibriones as 'formerly Roman soldiers, now truly the select among the number of allies' (*On the Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, 36.191).²¹ The Olibriones appear among a list of barbarian peoples—Franks, Burgundians, Saxons, and others—and so appear to have been not quite a 'people', yet were certainly not Roman regulars or personal retainers (*buccellarii*) under the command of the Roman general, Flavius Aetius.

Late and alien though Jordanes is as a source for the ethnic nuances of fifth-century Gaul, there is good reason not to dismiss his evidence as the product of some kind of confusion. One of the defining characteristics of the late Roman army was indeed the fluidity of identity between Roman and barbarian that it appears to have engendered. Ammianus Marcellinus' tale of the career of a character called Vadomarius, for example, is as revealing as it is at first sight surprising. He appears first as an Alamannic leader who attacks the Rhenish marches—possibly on the orders of the Emperor Constantius to keep his soon-to-be rival Julian occupied in Gaul—but ends his days as a Roman military commander far away in Phoenicia (*History*, 21.3.1–5). The incidental details of his life imply a high degree of Romanisation: he converses with Roman commanders, presumably in Latin (21.4.3); employs some form of bureaucracy (21.3.5); and may even have dwelt in a Roman-style residence then common in Alamannia. It is hard not to conclude, with men like Vadomarius in mind, that the difference between Roman and barbarian, on the frontiers at least, was largely political and even quite mercurial.²²

Cases such as that of Vadomarius have certainly prompted the intense problematisation of ethnic terminology. If identity could be determined more by those under and alongside whom one fought than by a deeply held, primordial sense of origin, who and what really was a Goth, a Frank, or a Roman? This problem dominates a large body of scholarship on the transformation of the Roman world in the West. The political legacy of twentieth-century ethnic nationalism in central Europe, which spurred the scholarship of the Viennese School, means that the debate can reach polemical heights.²³ The profound influence of the ethnogenesis paradigm on scholarship on the Roman West has

helped to revolutionise the way in which textual and archaeological evidence for the sub-Roman world is interpreted and how early medieval European history—not least ‘Germanic’ history—is reconstructed. This influence begs at least one wider question: can similar complex approaches be extended to barbarians found on *limes* other than those of Germanic Europe?

The East

Scholarship on the fall of the Roman East and the seventh-century conquests has conventionally not been as divergent, developed, or as complex as scholarship on the West. This is in some respects quite surprising, given that the modern study of Islamic origins is hardly an ossified area. Western orientalism has indeed come a long way since William Montgomery Watt, as some more recent scholars have somewhat unfairly suggested, was able essentially to translate the Islamic tradition on the life and times of the prophet and to pass it off as pure history.²⁴

Bold interpretations that entirely overturned the conventional Islamic narrative became possible following the publication of *Hagarism* in 1977. Its authors, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, discarded sources internal to the Islamic tradition in preference for more contemporary evidence that suggested a radically different vision of the early ancestors of the later Muslims.²⁵ The fundamental limitations, structural constraints, and authorial influences on the Islamic tradition—which, it must be emphasised, supply not primary but *secondary* evidence—are now well known and will be addressed in due course. Yet, despite a generation of strident criticism of the Islamic tradition, many modern reconstructions of the seventh-century conquests can still read as little more than re-workings of the great ‘Abbāsīd conquest narratives.

This ‘schizophrenic approach’ to early Islamic history has not gone unnoticed.²⁶ In a sharp contrast to the voluminous competing analyses of the barbarian invasions of the Western Roman Empire, where contingency, chances for Roman recovery and a conscious rejection of teleology seem to rule, a number of influential contemporary accounts by western orientalist tell the story of the rise of Islam and of the conquests as a short, sharp and simple military campaign with an all but forgone conclusion.

The armies of the Arabian conquests are presented as expertly organised, disciplined forces, motivated to a man by the revelation of the prophet Muḥammad. Their deeds are said to have been a ‘remarkable testament to the power of human action mobilised by ideological commitment as a force in human affairs’.²⁷ Leadership from Medina is thought to have been crucial, as it ostensibly proved

able to mobilise the united tribes of the peninsula into an extraordinarily powerful strike-force, in a world-shattering demonstration of ‘nomad power.’²⁸ The newly converted—and apparently fully committed—tribes of Arabia are presented as riding out of the Ḥijāz to remake the decaying ancient world into a vibrant, new Islamic Empire. Counter-attacks by the great powers are seen as momentary setbacks, if they are mentioned at all, able to be written out of history lest they obscure the inevitable.²⁹

This teleological undercurrent is often revealed in the language and imagery a number of scholars on the period employ. The admittedly shorter duration of the conquest of the Roman Near East relative to that of the Roman West receives considerable emphasis, even though it took far longer than many more modern wars that nonetheless provoke detailed piecemeal reconstructions. The campaigns are frequently described as ‘swift’, over by the end of the paragraph in which they began.³⁰

Another telling example of this tendency is the way in which contemporary reactions to the conquests are envisioned. One such instance would be the putative reaction of Roman leaders to their defeats in the Near East. Following the fall of the province of Syria, at least one author has imagined that ‘it cannot at that time have been certain for Heraclius that the Arabs would not continue their victorious march through the Asia Minor heartland to Constantinople itself’.³¹ The surprise is not that the Arabian conquests solidified into a new state that ushered in a new world, but that the hand of history was stayed from the walls of what the Byzantines called the Queen of Cities. The historian stands in the modern world and looks back with full awareness of the unprecedented world power that was the medieval Caliphate—and its later assaults on Constantinople—rather than in the early seventh century with its inheritance of a history of lasting Roman power, shaken though it may have been in the recent war against Persia.³²

One quite recent development in Islamic historiography that could begin to alter this deterministic analysis is the embrace of early Islam by Late Antiquity. Important conceptual evolution is already evident. The difference between the *Cambridge History of Islam*, published in 1970, and the *New Cambridge History of Islam*, published in 2010, demonstrates the considerable extent to which approaches to early Islam in western scholarship have developed. The first two chapters of the former are entitled ‘Pre-Islamic Arabia’ and ‘Muhammad’.³³ The perspective is patently limited to the Arabian Peninsula and to the Islamic tradition.

The latter rejects this paradigm completely. The first volume of the history is divided into four parts, the first of which contains four

chapters under the heading 'The Late Antique Context.'³⁴ Few indeed are the serious western historians of Late Antiquity who would now start the story of Islam from the life of the prophet. It is increasingly accepted that the religious movement inspired by Muḥammad would have been impossible without the development of statist faiths—not least within the Christian Roman Empire—and the impact of great power rivalry between Rome and Persia on the Arabian peninsula. Islam, it is now widely recognised, was not an alien irruption into the ancient world, but in many ways was the natural fulfilment of trends reaching back into it, evident even before the third century.³⁵

What could be called the back-story of Islam has also benefitted from closer study of the Arabian groups that dominated the peninsula in the century before Muḥammad . Recent years have seen the publication of a number of important studies on entities like the Ghassān and the Lakhm , the leading sixth-century client powers of Rome and Persia respectively.³⁶ These studies have been enabled, in part, by the dramatic increase in the study of the epigraphy and archaeology of the desert over the past thirty years, which has given modern scholarship the means to paint an ever more detailed picture of the societies living on the margins of the great empires. Knowledge of southern Arabia, moreover, has likewise grown dramatically owing to such research, producing fascinating and thought-provoking insights on the religious and political life of late antique Yemen that deserve greater attention with respect to explaining the origins of Islam.³⁷ Modern works on the north Arabian groups, interestingly, tend increasingly to be indebted to the more complex methodology associated with the Roman Empire's western *limes* . Yet many such works do not, for whatever reason, cast this methodology on the conquest period itself. There seems to be a greater willingness to write an ever more complex and detailed prologue rather than to rewrite the story itself.

One recent book that dares to do so, however, and that self-consciously embraces the methodology used to study Germanic groups in the West, is Robert Hoyland's *In God's Path*.³⁸ Hoyland at one point even paraphrases a leading scholar of the later Roman West to suggest that the Arabian conquests were the result of, rather than the cause of, the collapse of the two great ancient empires.³⁹ His book—a serious yet accessible narrative of the seventh-century conquests and the early Islamic Empire that demonstrates the interpretive importance of past decades' scholarly developments—offers a refreshing and ready alternative to other versions of the same story written by westerners more in hock to the conventional Islamic tale, which may prove popular. That said, it is hardly inevitable that Hoyland's conclusions will come to dominate the field, despite the late antiquarian turn in

Islamic studies. Fred Donner's equally readable *Muḥammad and the Believers*, even though it shows how dramatically Donner's thinking has evolved since his 1981 book in light of the discipline's increasing methodological complexity, offers an entirely different perspective on early Islam to that of Hoyland's.⁴⁰ Donner somewhat esoterically argues, largely on the basis of a novel reading of the Qur'ān, that Muḥammad was a post-sectarian monotheist reformer rather than the founder of a new faith. He also demonstrates a tendency to downplay the violence and drama of the conquests. Donner's perspective may not be without considerable attraction, given how its radical findings could be construed to address more current issues.⁴¹

Overall, these new developments point to an increasingly vibrant and sophisticated discipline, even if scholarship has hardly begun to answer every question the seventh century provokes. More conventional interpretations of the conquests, however, remain strikingly entrenched. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that there has been a newly impassioned embrace of the causal framework of the Islamic tradition by some scholars of Late Antiquity, encouraged by comparative studies of non-Islamic source material that seem to confirm the basic outline of the tradition.⁴² The conclusion to a recent *magnum opus*, for example, which brings together a range of sources to try to reconstruct the early seventh century equates to a dramatic defence of the traditional narrative. Far from being merely disparate tribesmen, the men who formed the armies of the conquests are said to have been 'committed unto death...in essence ordered arrays of suicide fighters, endowed with extraordinary courage and daring'.⁴³ Clearly, the force and many of the details of the Islamic tradition are assumed to be true. The preaching of the prophet is thought to have inundated the peninsula, unleashing the warrior potential of the Bedouin, and returning scholarship to language redolent of Gibbon's imagery of the conquerors waging war with 'the fanatic cry of "fight, fight! Paradise, paradise!"'⁴⁴

There is at least one way in which such a notion can be tested. Of the various historiographical tools associated with late antiquarian scholarship, there is still at least one noticeable absence in the field of early Islam. It is increasingly accepted that there are striking similarities between the Germanic peoples and Arabian groups, as tribal peoples living next to a great empire. Yet, even though Hoyland's recent book made considerable strides in applying western methodology to the eastern frontiers, his earlier comment that 'no one has used these to produce a narrative/discursive study à la Geary or Pohl' still retains a not inconsiderable measure of its validity.⁴⁵

There may be good reason why this is so. At first sight, it could be argued that the nature of the Islamic sources preclude the kind of

detailed, diligent reconstructions that the more various and often more contemporary sources for the Germanic Conquests of the fifth century allow to be possible. The chief difficulties of reconstructing the first decades of Islam are indeed inherent within the nature of the sources, which lead naturally to presenting the seventh-century conquests as a short, sharp campaign performed by religious fanatics. It is important, therefore, briefly to consider the nature of these sources, to see whether they can be persuaded to reveal their secrets.

Footnotes

1

E. Gibbon , *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: edited in seven volumes with introduction, notes, appendices and index by J.B. Bury* Vol. 1. (London, 1896).

2

Ibid, v. Gibbon demarcates three distinct periods of imperial collapse: the fall of the West, culminating in the Ostrogothic conquest of Italy; the crisis of the Eastern Empire in the seventh and eighth centuries; and the High Medieval denouement at the hands of the Turks (v–vi).

3

The general neglect of the Roman East can be partly explained by West Europeans' tendency to identify with "'our" Roman empire' and not the Rome westerners came to call 'Byzantium', 'a suitably exotic name...difficult to pronounce with confidence, and redolent of incense and mosaics' as argued by B. Ward-Perkins, 'The Decline and Fall Industry', *Standpoint*, September 2009, accessed on the 15th April 2015 www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/2038/full.

4

The impact, even the reality, of the eclipse of Roman power in the western provinces remains a matter of intense scholarly debate. P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford, 2011) 42–89, gives a concise narrative bringing together many conceptual insights into the process of imperial decline; he nonetheless emphasises the occasionally bloody reality of the empire's end.

5

M. Whittow , *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley, 1996) 96.

6

The best study of the structural changes that the state fast becoming medieval Byzantium

experienced remains J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century: The Transformation of a Culture* (Cambridge, 1997) 173–253.

7

The best example of this approach is currently P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (Macmillan: London, 2005) 145–459. B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation* (Oxford, 2005) 188–191, tellingly starts his chronological appendix with the year 376.

8

W. Seyfarth, ed., *Ammiani Marcellini rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt* (Leipzig, 1978).

9

See Heather, *Fall*, 184–189 for the exceptional nature of the treaty of 382 .

10

C. Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (Penguin: London, 2010) 78–79, for example, divides the fall of the West into three stages and sees the occupation of Mauretania by the Vandals and Alans in 435 as first opening the possibility of total imperial implosion.

11

A. Piganiol , *L'Empire chrétien: 325–395* (Paris: 1947) 422 for the (in)famous *sententia*.

12

G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007) 283.

13

The paradigmatic example of the first approach remains W. Goffart , *Barbarians and Romans A.D. 418–584: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, 1980). The same author sets out a seductive case for intra-imperial rivalry in W. Goffart , “Rome, Constantinople and the Barbarians” in W. Goffart , *Rome’s Fall and After* (The Hambledon Press: London, 1989) 1–32.

14

J. Drinkwater and H. Elton, eds., *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* (Cambridge, 1992).

15

R. Mathisen, and D. Shanzer, "Introduction," in R. Mathisen and D. Shanzer, eds., *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: revisiting the sources* (Aldershot, 2001) 1.

16

F. Paschoud, *Roma Aeterna Études sur le patriotisme romain dans l'occident latin à l'époque des grandes invasions* (Neuchâtel, 1967). Paschoud demonstrates 'the existence, not only of patriotism, but also of an ideology of patriotism' (324).

17

It is more accurate, as a general rule, to describe states before the era of nationalism as 'much more segmented and pluralistic "membership regimes,"' containing various identities and distinct social groups within the same political formation; see U. Bosma, G. Kessler, G. and L. Lucassen, eds., 'Introduction', in *Migration and Membership Regimes in Global and Historical Perspective: An Introduction* (Brill, 2013) 10–11.

18

R. Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Böhlau: Köln, 1961). The language of 'tribe' (*Stamm*) has been abandoned by contemporary scholarship owing to what is seen as the word's intrinsically racial undertones; 'ethnogenesis' is the preferred term for *Stammesbildung*. English has difficulty in alighting upon a single-word definition for Wenskus' *Verfassung*; 'constitution' does not have the same sense of referring to broad norms of behaviour and beliefs in English as it can in German.

19

A. Gillet, 'Introduction: Ethnicity, History, and Methodology', in A. Gillet, ed., *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Brepols: Turnhout, 2002) 1–18 gives an overview of Wenskus' legacy.

20

Ammianus' use of *dudum* ('formerly'/'on a previous occasion') to describe the first set of slaves and his description of the second group from *adiectis* ('joined to') makes it clear that he is talking of different groups.

21

T. Mommsen, ed., *Jordanis Romana et Getica* (Berlin, 1882).

22

Such at least is the conclusion in H. Elton, 'Defining Romans, Barbarians, and the Roman Frontier', in R. Mathisen, and H. Sivan, eds., *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Ashgate, 1996) 126–135.

23

P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: 2002) is an example. Geary, *inter alia*, expresses horror at growing European concern at immigration, insinuating, in effect, that public calls for the improved policing of borders risk a repeat of the 1930s and 1940s (5).

24

W.M., Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953) and W.M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956). All such accounts are said to be 'historiographically obsolete' by C. Robinson, 'The rise of Islam, 600–705', in C. Robinson, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I – The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries* (Cambridge, 2010) 187, footnote 35.

25

P. Crone and M. Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977). The authors' at times dense, difficult and self-consciously iconoclastic book suggested that the Islamic movement started as an alliance between Messianic Jews and closely affiliated Arabs for whom Muḥammad was constructed as an ever more unique religious figure.

26

C. Hillenbrand, 'Muhammad and the Rise of Islam', in P. Fouracre, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History I, c.500–700* (Cambridge, 2005) 317–345; 330 for the quote.

27

F. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981) 9. This work is probably the most sophisticated defence of the conventional Islamic narrative presented by a contemporary orientalist, whose more recent thoughts have developed in remarkable ways, as will be discussed. The approach of H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (Longman: Harlow, 1986) is very similar to Donner's 1981 book; see for instance 50–81. Both remain staples of undergraduate reading lists and are in general widely influential. The lasting authority of the latter, moreover, is demonstrated by the fact that it is cited as a first port of call on the conquests in Sarris, *Empires*, 263, footnote 190, despite Sarris' divergent perspective on early Islam.

28

Hillenbrand, 'Muhammad', 325.

29

Roman counter-attacks receive no mention in *ibid*. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age*, dismisses episodes like the Roman reconquest of Alexandria in 645 as insignificant (65);

there is similarly no mention of the Mardaites, a Roman-backed guerrilla force that operated in the Levant in the later seventh century.

30

H. Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (Routledge: London & New York, 2001) 2 for an example.

31

C. Bosworth, 'The Byzantine Defence System in Asia Minor and the First Arab Incursions', in M. Bakhit, ed., *Proceedings on the Second Symposium on the History of Bilād al-Shām During the Early Islamic Period Up to 40 A.H./640 A.D.: The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilād al-Shām* (Amman, 1987) 116–124; 119 for the quote.

32

The conventional date for the first Umayyad siege of Constantinople is 674, thirty years after the fall of Syria, a temporal pause that would surely undermine the notion that it was conceivable to contemporaries that the Arabian armies were on the verge of rolling across Anatolia. It should be noted that the historicity of this siege has been challenged convincingly by J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010) 303–304. The first Umayyad siege, therefore, probably took place as late as 717.

33

I. Shahīd, 'Pre-Islamic Arabia', 1–29, and W.M. Watt, 'Muhammad', 30–56, both in P. Holt, A. Lambton, and B. Lewis, eds., *The Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I* (Cambridge, 1970).

34

Robinson, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam*. The late antique inheritance and consideration of both the Sasanian and Roman Empires are given full, even greater attention alongside pre-Islamic Arabia in chapters written by specialists in the respective fields.

35

G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993) esp. 138–175.

36

See G. Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011) for perhaps the most sophisticated such recent study. Fisher is also the editor of two important essay collections that look at the peoples who inhabited the frontiers of the great

empires of antiquity, J.H.F. Dijkstra and G. Fisher, eds., *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014) and G. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford, 2015). Further important and up-to-date work that focuses on Rome's Arabian clients alone can be found in D. Genequand and C.J. Robin, eds., *Les Jafnides: des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VI^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne), actes du colloque de Paris, 24–25 novembre 2008* (Éditions de Boccard: Paris, 2015).

37

For an up-to-date study on what epigraphy reveals about the religious ferment of southern Arabia, see C.J. Robin, 'The Peoples beyond the Arabian Frontier in Late Antiquity: Recent Epigraphic Discoveries and Recent Advances', in Dijkstra and Fisher, eds., *Inside and Out*, 33–79. Glen Bowersock, among others, has harnessed a growing awareness of the politics of the Red Sea world to produce compelling new interpretations and arguments for this area's wider significance; see as a starting point G.W. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford, 2013).

38

R. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford, 2015) 1–7 and 16–21 for comments on what the study of early Islam can learn from the study of the Germanic conquests. Hoyland also offers a refreshing and astute embrace of gradualism, chance, and accident rather than teleology in explaining the conquests (see for example 61–63).

39

Ibid., 'we should probably consider the Arab conquests as an outcome of this decline rather than its cause', 27, paraphrasing Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, 'The "barbarian migrations" were, therefore, the product of the end of the Roman Empire, and not vice versa', 34. Hoyland of course acknowledges the debt.

40

F. Donner, *Muḥammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 2010).

41

Donner's thesis may be of an especial appeal to elements in society and in academia concerned at the criticism of Islam by their political opponents, and consequently in need of a sophisticated answer as to why it is not an intrinsically bad or threatening ideology.

42

The most comprehensive such study is R. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997).

43

Howard-Johnston , *Witnesses*, 451.

44

Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. 5, 418.

45

R. Hoyland , ‘Arab kings, Arab tribes, and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in Late Roman Epigraphy’, in H. Cotton, R. Hoyland , J. Price, and D. Wasserstein, eds., *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009) 374–400; quote 374.

3. The Problem of the Islamic Sources

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Abstract

This chapter concisely addresses the fundamental issue faced when trying to reconstruct the seventh century and early Islam: the intensely problematic nature of the Islamic sources. The texts on which conventional understandings tend to rely—notably the works of al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī—were written centuries after the events they purport to describe and were ultimately based on a mercurial oral tradition. It is argued that they could not have accurately captured the world of Classical Islam’s seventh-century ancestors. Recent advances in the study of the Islamic historical tradition are, however, acknowledged as giving good reason not to dismiss the later texts entirely. Comparative study with other, more contemporary sources has proved itself one way of sifting sound information from the questionable. The chapter ends by asking whether there is any other kind of comparative approach that could prove fruitful.

KeywordsAl-BalādhurīAl-ṬabarīOral historyComparative history

Even though it is possible to castigate some scholars of the seventh-century conquests for writing history as if they were tracking the movements of a modern army across the battlefields of Europe, it is worthwhile to think about how perspectives may have been constrained by the nature of the source material at hand. Some historians of the conquests seem to have been prisoners enchained by the Islamic tradition perhaps to a far greater extent than have scholars in other fields been captured by their sources. The example in the previous chapter of Heraclius’ alleged anticipation of an attack on Constantinople, for example, is suggestive of the influence the tradition can exert on modern accounts of the conquests. It seems to owe a lot to a story told of the Emperor Heraclius by the late ninth-

century scholar al-Balādhurī . Al-Balādhurī gives what apparently is his own imaginative reconstruction—there are no authorities directly cited—of Heraclius’ reaction after the Battle of Yarmouk .

And when the news of the people of Yarmouk reached Heraclius, and the fall of his army at the Muslims’ hands, he fled from Antioch to Constantinople. And when he passed through al-Darb, he said, ‘Peace be with you, oh Syria, this country is a delight to the enemy, for the land of Shām has many pastures’. (*Book of the Conquest of the Lands*, 137)¹

It is both quite easy and tempting, from al-Balādhurī’s account, to picture Heraclius fleeing hell-for-leather through Anatolia to make a last stand at his capital. Why else would he flee as far as Constantinople, unless he expected Roman resistance to crumble and the invaders to arrive at the city’s walls?

The resonance of this short episode in the modern secondary literature is indicative of a wider trend. Lengthy sections of both al-Balādhurī’s and al-Ṭabarī’s history are dominated by rhetorically powerful battle narratives, in which a series of engagements are easily won by men explicitly called ‘Muslims’. The sense that one gets from reading such passages is often that of an unproblematic military conquest of the lands of Persia and Rome. Given that al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī are by far the most well-known and studied of the Islamic historians, the nature of the secondary historiography is, therefore, perhaps less remarkable. Recognition of the many important nuances in al-Ṭabarī , moreover, may have been obscured owing to the apparent greater reliance on al-Balādhurī , a result of his work’s far shorter and therefore more ‘accessible’ nature.²

What is remarkable, however, is that this deep influence exists despite the fact that one can ask profound *prima facie* questions of al-Balādhurī’s reliability owing to the often unlikely and contradictory details supplied and to the clearly rhetorical and triumphalist nature of his history. The various accounts with which al-Balādhurī weaves his tale of the conquest of Palestine are both typical and demonstrative of this nature (*Book of the Conquest of the Lands*, 138–144). Different commanders conquer the same areas in different years for the first time. The fall of Caesarea is probably the most confused example: ‘some say Mu’āwiyah conquered it...others that ‘Iyād bin Ghanm certainly conquered it...others that ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās definitely conquered it’ (140). The dates are also divergent (142). Al-Balādhurī feels able only to indicate that his sources agree that ‘Amr bin al-‘Ās was the first to invest the city, so contradictory are the stories relayed by his authorities. He also makes profound mistakes as to how whosoever first conquered Palestine organised the occupied

territories. Islamic judges, *qāḍīs*, are immediately appointed (141), despite the fact that the institution did not yet exist.³ The administrative arrangements of the ninth century are simply retrojected to the age of the conquests.

Al-Balādhurī above all tells a story in which the cities of Palestine fall easily to ‘Muslim’ armies who find themselves arrayed against sometimes hundreds of thousands of Roman soldiers. To call such accounts implausible would be to use very moderate language. Yet the sense and even the details of such tales has nonetheless been transposed into the secondary tradition. The soldiers of the armies of the Arabian conquests have essentially become—as they say so themselves—the agents of ‘irrevocable fate’ (*al-qaḍāʾ*) (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2254).⁴

The highly rhetorical nature of the Islamic sources and the powerful imagery of warriors riding through the Near East as the agents of fate certainly makes for an entertaining story. There is indeed good reason to read the stories transmitted in the Islamic tradition as just that: stories. The nature of the Islamic tradition, and the sheer number of contradictions it contains, has certainly not failed to elicit comment and considerable criticism, even if some scholars continue to use the sources of the tradition as an essentially accurate basis for writing history.

Far from being written in the full light of contemporary events, the first surviving Islamic historical sources were written as late as two centuries after the death of the prophet. Al-Balādhurī, for example, was probably born no earlier than the second decade of the ninth century.⁵ Fundamentally, the Islamic scholars whose works survive were writing in the milieu of an established faith and society, and not in the far more uncertain and ambiguous world of the Rāshidūn and Umayyad Caliphates. This is crucial, given the increasing recognition among Islamicists that the faith and the society it came to dominate took more than a century to develop into its Classical form.⁶ Modern scholars of Islam are progressively at pains to develop a new vocabulary to capture the nature of the early faith. ‘Paleo-Islam’, for example, is a very recent coinage that tellingly hints at the nascent faith’s early, more ambiguous nature.⁷

The later scholars, admittedly, did not compose their accounts without reference to earlier source material. Yet the source material that the ‘Abbāsīd scholars had to hand was extremely mercurial, even if it had reached them in already written form. The sources they used were ultimately derived from oral reports developed and transmitted in a religiously charged atmosphere. Individual narrative episodes — *akhbār*, *khavar* in the singular—were recited as isolated tales, spanning a few lines or several pages when written, passed from

generation to generation and latterly assembled into a roughly chronological order. The value of these tales depended on their transmitters, who were recorded prior to the account in a chain of authorities, or *isnād* (*asanid* in the plural).

The nature of oral transmission exposes the Islamic sources to a wide range of attacks on their historicity. The reaction of individual transmitters to the tales they heard and the ways in which this was influenced by folkloric genres and the existing traditions of the Near East must surely have made the nascent Islamic historical tradition prone to invention, fantasy and distortion. The act of written transmission should also not be considered an intrinsic preserver of original accounts: there can indeed be a very thin line between author, editor, and transmitter.⁸

The extremely late date of composition combined with the method of transmission has led some scholars to reject the Islamic historical tradition almost completely. Patricia Crone, above all, has argued convincingly that many of the 'facts' associated with the life of Muḥammad and the early days of Islam are in fact the inventions of a later age, developed to explain the many obscure verses of the Qur'ān.⁹ Thus does she contend that even something so fundamental to the traditional narrative as 'the Qurashī trade in incense, spices, and related luxury goods' is nothing more than 'a fiction'.¹⁰

The development of competing oral accounts would certainly explain why the tradition contains so many contradictions, not least as oral history tends to be a tool for the articulation of contemporary concerns through the legitimising vortex of time and tradition. This may not, it is important to note, necessarily have been a mendacious exercise. The experiences and concerns of one generation can simply slip out of history as they become incomprehensible in the age of that generation's grandchildren. Further, a religious tradition like that of Islam would be expected to prioritise religious, exegetical truth over historical fact, spurred by the religiosity of a society in which the 'assignment (of the scholar) was not to give boring lectures on history, but rather to evoke an emotional response to the great deeds of the Prophet and his Companions so as to commit people to Islam'.¹¹ This explains why some later accounts contain more detail than earlier texts: the tradition grew in the telling. There is little wonder, therefore, why a diligent traditionalist collecting *aḥādīth*, the sayings of the prophet, at about the same time as al-Ṭabarī was gathering material for his history, felt able to verify only 2762 accounts out of a corpus of 600,000 based on *isnād* analysis alone.¹²

This is not the place for a lengthy analysis of all of the various schools of thought on early Islamic historiography. It is nonetheless important to recognise that solid analyses of this 'vast, complex, and

sometimes almost impenetrably obscure' body of historical material can be 'utterly irreconcilable' with one another.¹³ Despite the fundamental qualifications placed on the Islamic tradition by Crone and others, there has therefore always been a not inconsiderable degree of faith in the tradition. There even recently seems to have been a renewed credulity, as has already been noted in Chap. 2. This is essentially the result of two major developments: work within the tradition that has made a strong case for the early date of many *asanid* and comparative work with sources external to the Islamic Tradition, which seems to have proved the historicity of certain episodes and the basic chronology of the conquests and the development of the early Islamic state.

Intense study of the *isnād* tradition of *ḥadīth* has suggested that the traditions on which the later scholars relied were quite old by the time pen was put to paper, in spite of the fact that the histories of the conquests were written centuries after the campaigns of the seventh century. According to Gautier Juynboll, the *isnād* tradition developed as early as the 690s, prompted by a desire among Muslims to demonstrate that any given aphorism did indeed date back to the time of the prophet. This was putatively motivated by a desire to distinguish any given *ḥadīth* from later material, which was already recognised as containing many spurious additions to the tradition.¹⁴ The implications of Juynboll's analysis, that later texts may indeed capture more than a glimpse of Islam's earliest decades, has recently been emphasised by Aziz al-Azmeh. He uses the relatively early date of the development of the tradition to support his contention that some western scholars have been critical of the Islamic tradition to an extent that they are not with other sources.¹⁵

This contention can be given additional validation with reference to the work of historians who have compared the information transmitted in the Islamic historical tradition with other sources generally more contemporary to the events they describe. If nothing else, such work has all but neutered the most sceptical of approaches to early Islam that sought to banish even the reality of the existence of the prophet Muḥammad from the pages of history.¹⁶ Robert Hoyland's magisterial work on the subject, most notably, affirmed the reality of a number of fundamental aspects of the conventional understanding of Islamic history. It was made clear that the groups of warriors marauding around the Near East in the 630s and 640s had their roots in middle Arabia. Secondly, they had certainly given themselves a name, which was previously unheard of, a new calendar, and were acting under some form of unified direction. This unified direction had its origins in the career of a man called Muḥammad, who purported to have been some kind of prophet, and who brought a

distinct religious message. The more precise nature of this message, a matter, it would seem, of profound importance to the identity and self-image of the conquerors, became ever more significant, not least from the 690s when it starts to be proclaimed on public media like inscriptions and coinage.¹⁷

Further work in this vein has produced a number of other conclusions that support, to an extent, the historical utility of the Classical Islamic authorities. Al-Ṭabarī, for instance, seems to get a lot of the outline of the events and the major players of the sixth century correct, even if he makes one or two egregious errors of dating.¹⁸ Some of the ways in which he transliterates Roman names, moreover, combined with his grasp of the power-politics between Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity, have encouraged some to imagine that he had access to quite old and now lost written Persian sources.¹⁹ Interestingly, the level of fascination he shows in, and the degree of detail he supplies concerning, the Arabian clients of the two great empires has also been thought to offer genuine perceptions on the century before Muḥammad.²⁰ The significance he gives to the Ghassān and the Lakhm may indeed be a valuable historical insight—as well as an indication of al-Ṭabarī's potential use as a source—as will be explored in Chap. 6.

Thus have recent scholarly developments made it possible for some to contend that 'it is evident that the amount of authentic information transmitted was considerable and that the arrangement was far from arbitrary'.²¹ Significant problems, despite recent research that encourages a more favourable assessment of the Islamic historical tradition, nonetheless remain. It is hard to escape the conclusion that any reconstruction of the early years of Islam still, and always will, rely to a considerable extent on 'bold surmises and moral certitude' given the fundamental nature and limited number of the sources.²² Important though the earlier dating of *asanid* may be, for example, the eighty-year gap between events like the death of the prophet and the first battles of the conquests leave considerable room for manipulation, false attribution, and outright invention. It may be telling that Juynboll attributed the very *raison d'être* of the *insād* tradition to the widespread contemporary recognition of spurious sayings being attributed to Muḥammad.²³

Secondly, even if the accuracy of the basic chronology of the Islamic tradition is accepted together with some basic facts like the reality of the prophet's existence, is this really enough to validate the more detailed information it transmits, let alone its causal framework? Proving simple facts, like the year in which an event took place, is not enough to prove a particular explanation as to what exactly any given event was, its significance, or why it happened. No one, for instance,

would doubt that the First World War broke out in 1914. The debate as to why it did so, however, is unlikely ever to end.

Scholarship on early Islam, therefore, appears still to possess the intrinsic tendency to be locked in a debate between those who adhere to various degrees of scepticism, and those for whom some proof can validate what may be an *a priori* faith in the tradition's validity. Secondary reconstructions of early Islamic history can consequently be written across one another, rather than with much reference to each other. One is encouraged to ask whether a new way could be devised to cross the academic no man's land between competing methods of approach to the sources, to try to use them intelligently and plausibly, rather than resorting to trust or to total rejection.

A New Comparative Approach

How, then, could the Islamic sources be used to try to reconstruct the seventh-century conquests? Can the legitimacy, or otherwise, of the later Islamic historians be tested in ways beyond the investigation of *asanid*, the conventional means of assessing the tradition's validity, which really requires a rarefied knowledge of the Islamic Sciences to be done fruitfully? Can the comparative analysis of the sources in any way be extended?

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, generations of scholarship on the Germanic Conquests of the Roman West has developed the kind of theoretical complexity that has made reassessments of the fifth century and of the relationships between Rome, as an imperial power, and neighbouring, less-developed peoples possible. Some of the more sophisticated approaches to ancient society on which these reconstructions depend are as yet absent from studies of the eastern *limes* in Late Antiquity, despite movements in their direction by some very recent studies. The significance of northern Arabia as an imperial frontier to explaining the conquests has not yet been fully explored. Ethnonyms, moreover, often tend to be employed without the obsessive—yet necessary and enlightening—problematisation they receive in sophisticated histories of the fall of the Roman West.²⁴

There is very good reason, therefore, to apply the conceptual tools developed for the Roman West to the Islamic sources for the Arabian marches of the Roman East. A close analysis of how the Arabian armies that invaded the imperial provinces behaved on the frontier, together with a consideration of the potential for some kind of process of social development taking place, offers a touchstone of plausibility against which the sources can be tested, and be used to reconstruct the conquests. Such a both solidly theorised and tested, empirical approach may help to peel back the layers of the Islamic historical

tradition to unearth what scholars often look for, or believe to exist, within the sources : a *Grundschrift*, or kernel of truth.²⁵ It may subsequently emerge, despite present, divergent historiographical trends, that there were more similarities to the two falls of Rome in Late Antiquity than has so far been recognised.

This is hardly, however, to suggest that the Islamic narratives can, or should, be read purely as history. Great projects like al-Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings* are complex, difficult texts that do more than merely recount events. In the next chapter, 'Abbāsīd age historiography will be compared to another type of history, which was written to suit the predilections of new societies that had established themselves in the lands of an ancient empire. This comparison will help to develop a deeper understanding of al-Ṭabarī's text. It will be argued that the Islamicising rhetoric of 'Muslim' conquest can, at least partly, be attributed to the nature of works like the *History of the Prophets and Kings* as texts of identity.

Footnotes

1

M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Liber expugnationis regionum auctore Imāmo Ahmed ibn Jahja ibn Djābir al-Belādsorī* (Brill, 1866).

2

H. Kennedy , *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (Longman: Harlow, 1986) 356.

3

J. Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford, 1964) 24–27 for the development of the office of *qāḍī*.

4

M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari* Vol. 4 (Brill, 1879–1901). The quote is taken from a speech given to a Persian commander by an Arabian captive—one of the many that resemble the episode quoted in Chap. 1—who assures him the Sasanian cause is hopeless as God, quite naturally, will give victory to the Muslims.

5

C. Becker and F. Rosenthal, 'al-Balādhurī' , in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Brill Online) accessed 5 June 2015.

6

R. Hoyland , *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, 1997) 4 gives 780 as the date by which Islam crystallised into its Classical form.

7

A. Al-Azmeh , *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources* (Gerlach Press: Berlin, 2014) vii.

8

Hoyland , *Seeing Islam*, 32–48.

9

P. Crone , *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987), 203–230 for a useful summary of her arguments with examples. See also P. Crone , *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980) 3–17, which also highlights the role of later polemic in twisting historical transmission and presentation.

10

Crone , *Meccan Trade*, 50.

11

Crone , *Meccan Trade*, 218.

12

J. Robson, ‘al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl’, in P. Bearman et al., ed., *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, accessed 20 May 2015.

13

R. Humphreys, *Islamic Tradition: A Framework for Inquiry* (London, 1991) x for the source material; 78 for the entirely divergent readings it has provoked.

14

G. Juynboll , *Muslim Tradition: Studies in chronology, provenance, and authorship of early ḥadīth* (Cambridge, 1983) 70–76 for a concise summary of his argument.

15

16

Probably one of the more comprehensive as well as controversial attempts to do so, with a heavy stress on archaeological evidence, is Y.D. Nevo and J. Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab state* (Prometheus: Amherst, N.Y., 2003). Even though it was formally published relatively recently in 2003, it had circulated in typescript for almost a decade previously—as revealed for instance by its citation in Hoyland , *Seeing Islam*, 801—and seems to have been all but finalised upon the death of one of its authors in 1992. It makes reference to very little scholarship published after the early 1990s.

17

Hoyland , *Seeing Islam*, esp. 545–559.

18

H. Munt, with contributions from T. Daryaei, O. Edaibat, R. Hoyland , and I. Toral-Niehoff, ‘Arabic and Persian sources for Pre-Islamic Arabia’, in G. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford, 2015) 434–500; see 450 for an example of al-Ṭabarī’s confused chronology.

19

Ibid, 460.

20

Ibid, 454–474.

21

J. Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010) 372.

22

Humphreys, *Islamic Tradition*, 80.

23

Juynboll himself remained deeply uncertain that ‘we will ever be able to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that what we have in the way of “sound prophetic tradition” is indeed just what it purports to be’ (*Muslim Tradition*, 71).

H. Kennedy , *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State* (Routledge: London & New York, 2001) esp. 4–5 demonstrates this tendency. ‘Arabs’ and ‘Persian soldiers’ are presented as rigid and immutable categories of person.

See, for instance, al-Azmeh , *The Arabs and Islam*, esp. 83–86 for the academic quest for—and defence of the notion of—a *Grundschicht*.

4. History for Purposes Other than History

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Abstract

This chapter takes the exploration of the Islamic sources for the seventh-century conquests in a new direction. It argues that texts like the *History of the Prophets and Kings* by al-Ṭabarī can be read as texts of identity: histories that speak to ninth- and tenth-century Islamic concerns to consolidate, praise, and rarify what it meant to be a Muslim. The chapter proposes this through comparative analysis with the *Getica* of Jordanes. Rather than reading the *Getica* as a dynastic history, it is demonstrated how it can easily be read as an *origo gentis* that not only tells the story of the Goths, but that also constructs the idea of the Goths as a people. The chapter ends by suggesting that, as sources like the *Getica* have encouraged scholars to look for the diverse roots of the western barbarians, the same interest should be applied to the Arabians.

KeywordsIdentity *Origo gentis* GothMuslim

If the Lord shall grant it, our tale will begin at a large island by the name of Scandza. This people, whose origin you ask (quia gens, cuius originem flagitas), arrived from the womb of this island like a swarm of bees, breaking into the land of Europe.... (Jordanes , *On the Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, I.9)¹

Jordanes begins his tale of the origin of the Goths far to the north of the geographical homeland of the people who were given the name of Goth in Late Antiquity . He continues to tell how the Gothic people moved from their primordial base to lands bordering upon the Black Sea (V.38), before eventually entering the Roman Empire (XXV.131ff). Jordanes explains the existence of two distinct Gothic peoples in his own time with reference to an ancient divide of the erstwhile united

people into two groups under different royal houses. The Visigoths are said to have been ruled by the Balth family from their distant days of residence by the Black Sea, and the Ostrogoths by another, somewhat grander family: the ‘distinguished Amals’ (V.42). The political dispositions of the middle of the sixth century, when Jordanes was writing, are therefore presented as exact reflections of venerable Gothic practice.

No modern historian, however, would chart such an easy course of Gothic migration and history as did Jordanes. He was writing at a considerable temporal remove from the events he purported to describe, in a very particular context—Constantinople, during the final stages of the Justinianic Reconquest of Ostrogothic Italy—with an obscure collection of sources.² It is consequently unsurprising that detailed deconstructions of Jordanes’ history have shown that it not only misses the fundamental changes unleashed in the Gothic world by the irruption of the Huns, but is also largely a construction of his own day. The underlying cause for the construction becomes clear when Jordanes’ chief model, the Italian Senator and Ostrogothic court official Cassiodorus, is borne in mind. The *Getica* is ‘history as the Amals liked to hear it told, rather than reality’.³

There is another aspect to the *Getica*, however, which is perhaps more significant than the text’s role as a document of dynastic legitimisation. Jordanes is the first extant example of a new breed of written history: the *origo gentis*, or ‘national history’.⁴ Challenges to this notion like those made by Walter Goffart, who refuses to see the evolution of a type of history distinct from Classical precedent, do not stand up to scrutiny.⁵ Jordanes explicitly breaks the model of Classical ethnography by focusing on the Goths alone: he both opens and closes his narrative by noting that his theme is indeed the ‘origin and deeds of the Goths’ (1 and LX.315 respectively). When Jordanes does discuss other peoples, it is only ever owing to their putative connection to the Goths and their role in the Gothic story, as is quite clear in the *Getica*’s treatment of Hunnic origins (XXIV.121–122). Digressions such as this should therefore not be read as examples of a wider, Classicising anthropological interest.⁶ Further, Goffart’s contention that the *Getica* was written to circulate as part of a wider literary series including Jordanes’ *Romana*—and its purposes as a text consequently dependent on a more complex and less Gotho-centric scheme—is simply ‘pure assertion’.⁷

The fact that Jordanes makes such a significant historiographical innovation begs the question as to why. Given that the prominence of the Amal family within the narrative is a product of Jordanes’ own time, it is highly likely that other contemporary concerns impinged upon his authorial purposes. A generation or more of scholarship has

conclusively proven that, despite Jordanes' claims to the contrary, the Ostrogoths of the sixth century did not all share a primordial origin in the distant reaches of the north, stretching back to ancient times. They were fundamentally a product of the various population movements, disturbances and social realignments concurrent with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the Roman Balkans. The Ostrogoths were 'a multi-racial political unit'.⁸

Yet disparate groups can become cohesive peoples if they believe in a myth of common origin. It is vital to explore, therefore, the extent to which Jordanes' history is not only a work of dynastic invention, but also a text of the construction of a wider social identity, in which the contemporary existence of something approaching the actuality of an Ostrogothic people forces their literary creation and projection into the past. An analysis of Jordanes that moves beyond the dynastic focus of much Anglophone secondary scholarship can then form a touchstone for assessing how the similar contemporary context of the authors of early Islamic history—members of another new society occupying ancient imperial space—could have catalysed the same dynamic. Convincing evidence for the clear construction of Islamic identity in al-Ṭabarī would naturally force the question as to why this was necessary, leading to an investigation of the actual groups that composed the ancestors of the 'Abbāsid authors: the conquering armies of the seventh century.

The Construction of the Goth in Jordanes

First, it is apparent that Jordanes was writing for a Gothic audience not necessarily attached to the Amal dynasty and its court, the principal audience for the *Gotengeschichte* of Cassiodorus. The Amal genealogy, it is important to note, only enters the text at XIV.79–81, rather than occupying a programmatic location at the *Getica*'s beginning. Further, in the summary of his work, Jordanes notes three distinct and equally important themes: 'thus we now have the tale of the origin of the Goths, the nobility of the Amals, and the deeds of brave men (*Getarum origo ac Amalorum nobilitas et virorum fortium facta*)' (LX.315). The *Getica* is far more, therefore, than the history of a single royal house.

Jordanes, quite significantly, identifies himself as a Goth at the end of his narrative, when he pre-empts what would seem to have been a likely criticism of his work. To deny that the *Getica* was too pro-Gothic, he writes, 'let no man believe that I have added anything to the glorification of this race (*gentis*) than what I have read and discovered, even though I trace my own origin from it (*quasi ex ipsa trahenti originem*)' (LX.316). In the dedication to his literary patron that opens the *Getica*, Jordanes addresses him as an ethnic cousin:

‘and if too little is said and you, as a neighbour to the race (*vicinus genti*), recall it, add it, praying for me dear brother’ (3). The *Getica*, therefore, was written by a Goth for a Goth, in what would appear to have been a more personal context than that which conditioned Cassiodorus’ work. Debate is likely still to continue around the potential wider audience of Jordanes, but the evidence of the text itself suggests that the principal audience of the *Getica* were people with a sense of ethnic Gothic identity who wanted to know about their people’s history.

Jordanes writes this history by constructing a Gothic people that share a primordial origin, that are brave in battle, and that have always been a part of the Classical world, in contradistinction to other barbarian peoples. Contemporary Gothic nomenclature is retrojected to their days on the island of Scandza: ‘let us return to the location of the isle of Scandza, which we left earlier...further away from these other tribes are the Ostrogoths (*sunt et his exteriores Ostrogothae*)’ (III.16–23). The division between Ostrogoth and Visigoth, as has already been noted, is likewise retrojected to the shores of the Black Sea (V.42), a political distinction that Jordanes explains by citing a story that neatly, and speciously, explains the words’ etymologies and gives the Ostrogoths a clearly fictional eponymous ancestor.

Let us now return to the place from where we digressed, and look at how the career of the people with whom we are concerned attained its fulfilment. Ablabius, the historian, tells that when those men who we said were dwelling in Scythia were there upon the shores of the Black Sea, a part of them, who held the eastern reaches, and over whom Ostrogotha was pre-eminent, were called Ostrogoths, from his name or from their eastern location (utrum ab ipsius nomine, an a loco). The rest were called Visigoths, that is to say, from the western part. (XIV.82)

Political and social identities of the sixth century, therefore, were said to have a simple, ancient origin, making them both attractive and legitimate.

Goths in Jordanes are, above all, heroic and successful warriors. The *Getica* is indeed nothing if not largely a rousing tale of the deeds of brave men. There are umpteen examples of Gothic valour in the text, all of which attest to the self-confidence of Jordanes’ people and the understandable desire of the author and his audience to buy into this invented tradition of peculiar martial prowess. Jordanes’ presentation of the role of the Visigoths at the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains is a telling example (XXXVIII.197–XLI.218). The reader is left in little doubt that it is the Goths, and not the Romans

or any other allied group in Aetius' confederacy, who are the heroes of the hour. The very fact that these heroes are *Visigoths*—the Ostrogoths receive only partial and largely indifferent treatment as Attila's allies—itself demonstrates how the *Getica* is a wider text of identity, rather than a narrow Amal/Ostrogothic dynastic history.

The tide of the battle starts to turn against Attila only after the Huns come under sustained pressure from the Visigoths. After the death of their King Theodorid (Theodoric I), the Goths almost kill Attila: 'then, the Visigoths split-off from the Alans, rushed into the army of the Huns and almost slaughtered Attila' (XL.210). This allegedly forced Attila to retreat to his camp. The battle nonetheless continued to rage and Aetius found himself in as much difficulty as his great nemesis. His natural recourse when in such danger was to seek the safety that clearly only the Goths could provide:

Aetius, likewise divided from his men by the confusion of the night, when he was wondering in the midst of the enemy, was afraid lest adversity had fell upon the Goths. He looked for them and, coming eventually to the camp of his allies, spent the rest of the night under the protection of their shields. (XL.212)

The *Getica*'s following report that Aetius eventually restrained the Goths from annihilating the Huns completely, owing to his fear of the Goths replacing the Huns as Rome's conquerors (XL.215–216), is further testimony to Jordanes' scheme of Gothic martial prowess.

The close and equal identification between Roman and Goth at the Catalaunian Plains, however, attests to the third major component of Jordanes' construction of a Gothic identity: the presentation of the Goths as an ancient Classical people and as partners of Rome. The *Getica* often writes Gothic myth-history into a number of far older Classical legends. One of the most entertaining examples is the tale relating how the Amazons were originally Gothic women who became separated from their men and so had to look to their own defence (VII.49–VIII.57).

The legend of the ancient Gothic King Telephus is another case in point. Jordanes seems to appropriate this son of Heracles from Classical mythology for two reasons. First, he provides the Goths with a hero who ably fits the scheme of Gothic martial prowess. Telephus is described as a man 'who equals with his own virtues his father's bravery and was said also to have been like him in appearance' (IX.59). Second, as a husband of a sister of Priam and a participant in the Trojan War, Telephus is associated with the mythical origin of the Roman people as related in the *Aeneid*. From ancient times, therefore, the Gothic story was peculiarly tied to the Roman.

The consequences of this ancient affinity are played out in the

Getica's retelling of Romano-Goth cooperation more contemporary to Jordanes' day. The Ostrogothic Conquest of Italy, most notably, is presented as an act of Roman reconquest performed by Theodoric, who describes himself as the 'slave' and 'son' of the Emperor Zeno (*servus vester et filius*) (LVII.289–292). This close, but ultimately metaphorical familial relationship, is not without precedent. When the Visigothic King Athavulf marries the emperor's sister Galla Placidia following the sack of Rome in 410, for instance, the Emperor Honorius is said to have been thankful that he now has a Goth as a kinsman (XXXI.160).

Honorius may have been pleased to have a Gothic brother-in-law as the *Getica* presents the Goths as a people innately superior to the average barbarian. The failure, for example, of a retainer of the Visigothic King Theodorid to fulfil his duty to his king is explained on purely racial lines: 'he was a man born of the stock of the Varni, a long way removed from the nobility of Gothic blood (*longe a Gothici sanguinis nobilitate*), so therefore neither striving for freedom nor honouring his word to his patron' (XLIV.233). The racial differentiation of the Goths from other barbarian peoples in this way reinforces Jordanes' Classicising scheme, as it raises the Goths to a status comparable with the once great and still ancient civilisation of Rome. The Goths of Jordanes consequently receive legitimacy and ethnic pride from such a close association with the Roman world, yet remain unique and a people apart as that world never completely absorbs them. When Theodoric persuades Zeno to order him to conquer Italy, for instance, Jordanes tellingly makes it clear that it is Gothic distinctiveness that has driven him to take this course: 'he chose, according to the usual custom of his people (*solito more gentis suae*), to seek conquest rather than to live in luxury in the Roman realm' (LVII.290).

The *Getica*, therefore, clearly makes a conscious and dedicated effort to construct the image of the idealised Goth. Jordanes inserts both pride and purpose into a speciously primordial Gothic identity. A Goth is a bold and victorious fighter who shares an ancient origin with his fellow tribesmen. This primordial origin explains how the Goths have been a part of the Classical world since ancient times and, therefore, a legitimate and worthy inheritor of the Roman world. The suggestion, however, that the *Getica* is such a bold text of identity implies that this identity had to be crystallised in writing, rather than that it had existed unquestioned for a long time. The disparate groups to whom the name of Goth attached in the sixth century needed a myth and exemplary heroic figures to give them a sense of unity and pride, precisely because they, as a people, were so new.

The Construction of the Exemplary Muslim in al-Ṭabarī

The well-known problems of the ‘Abbāsīd sources for the Arabian Conquests have already been covered in the preceding chapter, but it is worth reiterating how closely they mirror the same issues one finds in reading the *Getica* or any other western *origo gentis*. Both Jordanes and al-Ṭabarī were writing at a considerable temporal remove from the events they purport to describe, in a milieu radically different from that in which their ancestors, whose story they were attempting to capture, had lived. Both authors were basing their work on written and oral material. Oral testimony is a profoundly unstable medium. It is worth repeating that it is responsive more to the need to explain the present than objectively to retell the past, given the close and usually didactic interrelation of teller and recipient, and the tendency of the teller to remember and pass on information that is only relevant to the society as currently constituted, with irrelevant material simply forgotten.⁹

Significantly, both Jordanes and scholars like al-Ṭabarī were working in an environment in which history was being produced through a competitive dynamic. Jordanes, for example, alludes to the existence of various versions of Gothic origins being available in his own day: ‘if anyone, indeed, in our city should say that they (the Goths) arose from an origin other than what I have said, let him challenge me, for I prefer to place more trust in written material than to agree with the stories of old women’ (V.38). The literary dynamism of the early ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate far overshadowed the relatively minor degree of scholarly production and competition in the world of the sixth century central Mediterranean. The eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries were an age of explosive intellectual activity. The ninth-century jurist and historian al-Wāqidī, for example, was said to have bequeathed, upon his death in 823, six hundred trunks of books, requiring two men to carry each one of them.¹⁰

Men like al-Wāqidī and al-Ṭabarī were, moreover, two among a large body of scholars who competed for patronage, students and, ultimately, fame. The life of al-Ṭabarī neatly summarises the intensely agonistic nature of Islamic scholarship in this period. After first leaving home at the age of twelve years to study in Rayy, al-Ṭabarī travelled throughout the Islamic world to study under a range of different and competing scholars active as far apart as Egypt and Kūfah. His intellectual rivals as an adult in Baghdad are well known. Al-Ṭabarī is reported to have had long-running legal disputes with Abū Bakr Muḥammad bin Dāwūd, the son of the founder of the Zāhiri law school, as well as a dispute with the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal,

which occasionally led to violent assaults on al-Ṭabarī's person and property.¹¹ This scholarly passion testifies to the profoundly important impact scholarship produced in this period—in which history, like Islamic jurisprudence and Qur'ānic exegesis, was a discipline guided by intensely religious concerns—exerted on the fabric of Islamic society.

To make a version of history both relevant and acceptable to contemporary *mores*, therefore, it is highly likely that compilers like al-Ṭabarī were conditioned by a need to underline the Islamic nature of the various stories of the seventh century conquests they gathered or encountered in earlier written sources. There is a further reason why this was probably so. It has been suggested that the generation previous to that of al-Ṭabarī was the first in which a 'bandwagon effect' of conversion to Islam started to grip the peoples under the political sway of the Caliphate.¹² Conversion to Islam was at its most rapid between 791 and 975 in Iraq, by which time it has been cogently argued almost 70 percent of people living in Mesopotamia and its surrounds were Muslim. In al-Ṭabarī's Iranian homeland, interestingly, the same proportion of the total population accounted by Muslims was attained a century earlier, thereby placing the early years of the author of Islam's great conquest narrative in a veritable hotbed of Islamisation .

It is likely, therefore, that the authors of Islamic history were responding to a society that had only recently become Islamic in a majoritarian sense. Like the Gothic audience of Jordanes , a society such as this, which had only recently crystallised from disparate elements, needed to be told what a Muslim was, and needed a version of history that could both construct and consolidate a sense of pride in this identity.

It is of little surprise, therefore with this in mind, that one of the most striking themes to emerge from al-Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings* is a sense of the construction of the exemplary warrior Muslim.¹³ The deeds of Ṭulayḥah bin Khuwaylid al-Asadī, who in the Islamic tradition first fought against the Muslims during the wars of the *Riddah* before joining them, offers an instructive example. Before the pivotal battle of al-Qādisiyyah , traditionally dated to 636, Ṭulayḥah is ordered to make a series of raids upon the Persians. These raids tend to be conducted at night and provide set-piece scenes for inspiring acts of valour, which may have been preserved in the tradition as much for their entertainment value as for their simple exemplarity. One is worth citing in full as an example.

Ṭulayḥah went out and came to the Persian camp on a moonlit night (fi lailati muqmiri) and he watched it closely. He cut the ropes of a

man's tent and led his horse away. Then he went out until he passed by the camp of Dhū al-Ḥāḡib and he destroyed another man's tent and untied his horse. Then, he came to the camp of al-Jālnūs, destroyed another man's tent and untied his horse. Then he went out and came to al-Kharrārah and the man who was at al-Najaf and the man who was at the camp of Dhū al-Ḥāḡib came out and the man from the camp of al-Jālnūs followed Ṭulayḡah . And the first man to fall upon Ṭulayḡah was the Jālnūsī, then the Ḥāḡibī, and Ṭulayḡah killed these first two. And he captured the last man (the one from al-Najaf) and he brought him to Sa'd. (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2260)

Other accounts recycle many of the features of this first raid, not least the theme of the night attack, which appears to be a literary trope offering a stage for heroic display in a manner that brings to mind the Iliad. In a similar raid (2262–2263), for instance, Ṭulayḡah again attacks a camp alone, causes a minor degree of chaos within it, thereby prompting his pursuit, and slays two of his pursuers before taking the third captive. Such standard literary tropes probably entered the annals of al-Ṭabarī and the Islamic historical tradition originally from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, implying that such micro-narratives possessed an ancestral entertainment value. Stories such as these, like those attached to King Telefus and other Gothic heroes in Jordanes , probably gave its readers or listeners a sense of simple, warrior pride in the martial achievements of their ostensible forebears. Like a western *origo gentis* , the history of al-Ṭabarī and other earlier Islamic historians is very much a history of *Taten tapferer Männer*: the deeds of brave men.¹⁴

These deeds are often given a deeply Islamic colouring. Shortly after yet another night raid on a Persian camp, for example, Ṭulayḡah brings back a further prisoner, who converts to Islam and who receives the somewhat unimaginative name of 'Muslim' from his new master. This man is then used as a mouthpiece for the propagation of a set of laudable Islamic values.

And he returned to Ṭulayḡah and said: 'By God, you will not be defeated so long as you are as I see you, (people of) faithfulness, truth, peace-making and sympathy (wa allah lā tūhizamūna mā dumtum 'alā mā ārā min al-wafā' wa al-ṣidqi wa al-iṣlāh wa al-mū'āsāt). There is no need for me of association with Persia'. And he was among the people of excellent behaviour (ahl al-balā') on that day. (History of the Prophets and Kings, 2264)

The actual historical plausibility of such an episode as this is, of course, quite low. Even if al-Ṭabarī's assumption, that Islam was pretty much fully formed during the lifetime of the prophet, and

understood by the men of the conquering armies, is accepted—which it should not be—it is extremely doubtful that a convert to a new faith could have internalised and communicated its values in such a manner. Episodes such as this, therefore, are comprehensible less as an echo of what was remembered from the distant days of the conquest, and more as a means of contemporary instruction.

This tendency is perhaps more subtle but nonetheless quite powerful in the *khavar* of the visit of a certain Arabian envoy, Ribʿi bin ʿAmir, to the Persian commander Rustam (2269–2273). Ribʿi comes to be characterised as the very model of an austere, peculiarly Islamic warrior, in contradistinction to Godless, Persian luxury. The *khavar*, after telling of Ribʿi's selection as envoy, describes Rustam's tent in fulsome terms: it is replete with soft cushions, beautiful fabrics, and bright colours (2270). Ribʿi enters the scene as a man with no need for such material embellishments. He enters the tent, 'on a horse of his, which was hairy and small (*zabbā qaṣīrat*); he had a polished sword with him and its scabbard was made of rough cloth (*lifāfat taūbin kalaqin*)' (2270). After he dismounts and starts to walk toward the Persian delegation, Ribʿi makes a point of piercing the tent's cushions with his spear. When asked about his hostility to upholstery, he simply replies, 'indeed, we do not like to sit upon this finery of yours (*innā lā nastahhibu al-qu'ūd 'alā zīnatikim haḍahī*)' (2271).

The ideological opposition between Persian luxury and austere, peculiarly Islamic warrior virtue is made explicit in the exhortation Ribʿi gives to the Persians to encourage them to convert to Islam. The message of divinely-ordained, Islamic conquest is clear: 'God sent us (*allah ibta'athnā*)... (to grant) the justice of Islam ('*adl al-islām*) and he has sent us in his religion to his creatures, to call them to it (*linada'uhim ilāhi*)' (2271). This rhetoric, combined with Ribʿi's austere appearance, shows him to be an exemplary warrior Muslim, rejecting the superficial luxuries of this world to fight in the path of God and his religion.

The underlying message of the preceding passages, that victory will naturally follow if the mandates of Islam are obeyed, is set out dramatically in an encounter between Rustam and a Muslim prisoner. Rustam has the captured Arabian brought before him, whom he then interrogates.

And so Rustam said to him: 'What brought you and what do you want?' The man said: 'We have come to seek that promised by God (mau'ūd allah)... Your land and your sons and your blood, if you refuse to embrace Islam'. Rustam said: 'And if you are killed before this?' The man replied: 'As part of God's promise, anyone of us killed before this He will send to Paradise (Idkalahu al-janna) and He will

fulfil for who is left of us what I have said to you. Of that we are certain'. Rustam said: 'So have we been placed in your hands?' The man replied: 'Poor Rustam! Indeed your deeds have done this to you and so God has made you submit because of them (fa-islamakum allah bihā). And let not what you see around you beguile you, for indeed arrayed against you are not human beings but irrevocable fate (fa-innaka laisat tujāwala al-inas innamā tujāwala al-qaḍa')'. (History of the Prophets and Kings, 2254)

This neat passage accurately explains the fundamentals of Holy War, *jihād*, as well as feeding the teleological tendency intrinsic to the great conquest narratives. The society to which the history of al-Ṭabarī speaks can be assured of divine support and inevitable victory. The prisoner, moreover, comes across as a model of rectitude and of faith in adversity: an exemplary Muslim.

Histories of Goths and Muslims: Texts of Identity

The *Getica* of Jordanes and the *History of the Prophets and Kings* of al-Ṭabarī may come from different ages, locations and social contexts, but they share one fundamental feature. They are both, to a significant extent, texts of identity. They are histories that weave together a dense and ambiguous historical tradition partly to explain to people living in a new society who they in fact are. Legitimacy and solidarity is developed by claiming a united primordial origin, and pride — ethnic in the case of Jordanes, ethno-religious in the case of al-Ṭabarī — by constructing a series of heroic stories and warrior, exemplary forebears. Both texts are excellent examples of a phenomenon widely identified as inherent to histories and other types of text composed in the reimagining of the world that marked Late Antiquity as a period: the re-forging of the past.¹⁵ As historical sources, therefore, they should naturally be used with extreme caution.

The construction of Muslim identity inherent in the Islamic historical tradition has a number of specific ramifications on how texts like the *History of the Prophets and Kings* should be read, which is not recognised as deeply as it should be in secondary scholarship. First, it is right to be sceptical at the blanket use of 'Muslim' to describe the conquering armies of the seventh century, as this reflects more the identity of later ages than the first century of the *hijra*. 'Muslim' may even have had quite a restricted meaning in the days of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, something that would suggest the ranks of the conquering armies were probably more open than the later tradition can often imply.¹⁶ Secondly, tales of Muslim valour on the battlefield

should be recognised as primarily a literary creation, probably relying on both pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as well as on the imagination of later generations. Heroic campaigns always make good stories, but their grand sweep can often obscure more prosaic historical realities. Thirdly, the very nature of Islamic histories as texts of identity should act as a constant reminder of how gradual the development of Islamic society and a fully articulated Islamic identity actually was. Islamic identity had to be constructed precisely because it was not primordial, in a manner that recalls the invention of an ancient royal lineage for the Amal family and the manufacture of a venerable and unchanging Gothic identity in Jordanes .

These three insights point to a new way of reading the Islamic sources for the conquests of the seventh century. As much as research on groups like the Goths focuses on how internally diverse they actually were, so research into the early Islamic armies should be unafraid to look behind the ethno-religious rhetoric of later historians to look for a more plausible, less deterministic, and more ambiguous historical reality—something approaching the oft-looked-for kernel of truth .

Footnotes

1

T. Mommsen, ed., *Jordanis Romana et Getica* (Berlin, 1882).

2

For a detailed treatment of Jordanes , his sources and his milieu, see P. Heather, *Goths and Romans: 332–489* (Oxford, 1991) 3–67.

3

Ibid., 60. See also P. Heather, ‘Cassiodorus and the Rise of the Amals: Genealogy and the Goths under Hun Domination’, in *Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989) 103–128 for a demonstration of the factual inaccuracy and intrinsic implausibility of the Amal genealogy. The authorial relationship between Cassiodorus and Jordanes is a complex issue, which cannot be explored here. It will become apparent, however, that there are good reasons not to overstate the influence of Cassiodorus and his immediate context on the *Getica* to the exclusion of the role of Jordanes as the text’s author.

4

H. Grundmann, *Geschichtsschreibung im Mittelalter: Gattungen, Epochen, Eigenart* (Göttingen, 1965) 12–13. Grundmann actually identifies Cassiodorus’ work on Gothic history as the first work of national history, seeing Jordanes’ text as a summary (*Auszug*) of his greater model.

5

W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History A.D., 550–800: Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988) 3–18 for general challenges; 20–110 for consideration of Jordanes. A. Gillett, ‘The Mirror of Jordanes: Concepts of the Barbarian, Then and Now’, in P. Rousseau and J. Raithel, eds., *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 392–408, is a rare follower of Goffart.

6

Such a reading is suggested in Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, 62–68.

7

Heather, *Goths and Romans*, 48. Heather also convincingly critiques Goffart’s idiosyncratic reading of the *Getica* as a romantic epic.

8

Heather, ‘Cassiodorus and the Rise of the Amals’, 105.

9

J. Goody and I. Watt, ‘The Consequences of Literacy’, in J. Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968) 27–68, esp. 28–34.

10

C. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, 2003) 6–8.

11

C.E. Bosworth, ‘al-Ṭabarī’, in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Brill Online) accessed 17 May 2015.

12

R. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge Mass. and London, 1979) 82.

13

M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari* (Brill, 1879–1901).

14

H. Wolfram , ‘Einleitung oder Überlegungen zur *Origo Gentis*’, in H. Wolfram and W. Pohl , eds., *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern I* (Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften: Vienna, 1990) 19–31; 22 for Wolfram’s summary of the subject matter of an *origo gentis* , which he describes first and foremost as containing ‘tidings of the deeds of brave men’.

15

For an elucidation of this theme, see A. Cameron, ‘Remaking the Past’, in G. Bowersock, P. Brown, and O. Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge Mass. and London, 1999) 1–20.

16

Such at least is the contention already noted in Chap. 2 as made by F. Donner , *Muḥammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge Mass., 2010), based on his earlier and more scholarly article F. Donner , “From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community,” in *Al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–03), 9–53; 28–34 for the putative original meaning of ‘Muslim’.

5. Making ‘Muslims’ on the March

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Abstract

This chapter begins by asking one question: what is in a name? The study of choice passages from the writings of the Roman diplomat Priscus that give an insight into fifth-century Hunnic society demonstrates that, behind simple ethnonyms like ‘Hun’ or ‘Roman’, there existed a far more ambiguous and opaque reality. The chapter notes that a focus on the construction of peoples out of various groups is a major obsession in research on the western barbarians in Late Antiquity, spearheaded by scholars at the University of Vienna. This methodology is then applied to a number of passages from al-Ṭabarī’s *History of the Prophets and Kings*, which reveal that the armies that invaded the provinces of Persia and Rome grew on the march in the same manner as did the armies of the western barbarians. The men who made Islam possible, therefore, came from quite diverse origins.

Keywords Ethnogenesis Invasion War Traditions kern

Someone, whom I thought to be a barbarian from his Scythian garb, came towards me and greeted me in the Greek language, saying, ‘khaire’. I was astounded that a Scythian was speaking Greek. As they are a mixture of peoples, in addition to their own languages they cultivate Hunnic or Gothic...But none can easily speak Greek....
(Priscus, *Fragments*, 11.2.410–413).¹

Appearances can often be deceptive, as the Roman ambassador Priscus discovered at the camp of Attila the Hun. Far away from the imperial capital and the provinces of the empire, and in a possibly dangerous foreign land on a sensitive diplomatic mission, the last thing Priscus probably expected was to meet a man with whom he could converse as a fellow countryman.

Priscus' journal records the conversation that ensued (*Fragments*, 11.2.413–510). It turns out that the man clothed in the utterly barbarian raiment of the steppes was no Hun, but a Roman merchant from Viminacium, the capital of the province of Moesia Superior. He tells Priscus that, after being captured and taken as a slave, he proved himself skilful in battle – against both a tribe called the Akatiri and erstwhile fellow Romans—and was able to win a lot of booty for his master. He was consequently granted his freedom, and allowed to marry a barbarian wife; perhaps the most personally significant way of grafting oneself into a new community. Priscus was even told by his new acquaintance that he now supped at his former master's table as an equal. An anecdote as profoundly personal, detailed, and insightful as this forces one question above all to be addressed when trying to reconstruct the nature of ancient societies: what, and who, in fact, is in a name?

Insights from the Viennese School

It is telling that, almost in passing, Priscus implies a prior awareness that the name 'Hun' indeed hides a more complex reality: 'they are a mixture of peoples' (ξύγκλυδες γὰρ ὄντες). Disentangling just who such people were, in what were in fact the fairly disparate tribal agglomerations often presented as monochrome peoples in the Classical sources for the barbarian West, has been a hugely popular trend in scholarship on the Germanic invasions for the last half century. It is worth looking at this school of thought in greater depth than was done in Chap. 2. Reinhard Wenskus has begotten a veritable tribe of historians who have followed his lead, not least Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl, his respective successors at the University of Vienna. Their research and reconstruction of the ancient Germanic tribes that appear in Latin and Greek sources has focused above all on deconstructing the tribes' constituent members, thereby demonstrating that the united, primordial origin that these tribes tend to project in later sources, like the *Getica*, are largely mythical. This kind of complex, theoretical approach to ethnicity in the ancient world has ultimately destroyed the notion that ethnicity is both biologically determined and immutable.²

Debate on the mechanisms by which new peoples were forged from disparate elements has occasionally tended to revolve around the nature, extent, and transmission of a *Traditionskern*. In its original formulation, a *Traditionskern*, a core of tradition, refers to a nexus of orally transmitted tribal legends, to which heterogeneous groups can subscribe as they fall under the sway of the original bearers of such traditions, inevitably a warrior band able in the first instance to coerce allegiance to a chief or band of ruling men. Adherence to the

Traditionskern promoted an equal absorption of shared norms of behaviour, like dress, death rituals, even cuisine—what Wenskus called *Verfassung*—that gave any given group a deep sense of social solidarity. Thus, from small and various tribal origins, was a people born: a process now universally termed ‘ethnogenesis’.³

The theory of ethnogenesis is not without its critics.⁴ Some of the criticisms it tends to attract, however, tend to focus more on the historiography and transmission of many of the texts on which the writing of history relies than on the solid material they contain. As was implied in the critique of Walter Goffart’s reading of the *Getica* in the previous chapter, such an approach can produce readings that tend towards the mannered and obscure, and that ignore many of the insights from the texts themselves.

Other criticisms of the model have largely been answered in the various refinements offered to Wenskus’ formulations since the 1960s. Wenskus’ deeply aristocratic and immovable colouring of the *Traditionskern* has, for instance, been markedly improved by Pohl . The *Traditionskern* should no longer be seen as a primordial, unchanging rock in a shifting social sea, but as a looser agglomeration of myths and practices that was open to redefinition and innovation as new groups joined a confederation. Elites had to respond to a wider body of men, and often had to enter into some kind of dialogue with the people they came to dominate.⁵ The dominant identity, therefore, could conceivably become as mutable as the identities it tended to absorb, and whose distinctions it tended to erase.

Ethnogenesis , considering its theoretical sophistication and well-attested application to a whole raft of examples from and beyond Late Antiquity , can claim to be the dominant paradigm in the field of early medieval western ethnography. A recent description of the Empire of Attila, for example, has painted it as a truly ‘multicultural’ realm, in which ‘individuals, probably in large numbers, were busy renegotiating their identities as part of their attempt to navigate their way to prosperity, as political conditions and opportunities changed around them’.⁶ Priscus’ so-called Roman Hun has therefore been seen as just one example of a far wider trend.⁷

Perhaps the most crucial component of ethnogenesis theory is the context in, and catalyst by, which is it seen to take place: warfare. Great confederations like that ruled by Attila were certainly not won by peaceful diplomacy, but hacked out of history by the sword. As much as the Hunnic Empire may have been an example of how effervescent the construct of identity can be, it is vital to remember that the process of the formation of a new identity was hardly an entirely voluntary activity for the majority of Attila’s subjects. Priscus’ interlocutor had hardly walked along an easy path to success. It is also

not unlikely that his story captures the experiences of the most fortunate of Hunnic captives, rather than of the overwhelming majority.⁸ The Hunnic ambassador Orestes, however, who is described by Priscus as ‘of the Roman race’, at least shows that the other Roman Hun was not entirely exceptional (*Fragments*, 11.1.2–5).

War, especially in the ancient world, where bloodshed was not limited to the battlefield and in which whole regions could be ravaged and their populations seized as slaves, has a tendency to dissolve the social and cultural status quo prevailing under peace. The stability on which previous identities depended disappears, and the simple need to survive can force compromises and rapid acculturations inconceivable and impossible at any other time. Close emotional ties forged in the heat of the battlefield can prove resilient, and lead to the formation of a new, shared identity that comes to be as strong as the milieu in which it was formed was brutal. It is in many respects unsurprising that a late antique definer of terms, Isidore of Seville, seems to have closely identified an army with an ethnic identity, when looking at the same phenomenon from the opposite perspective: ‘an army (*exercitus*) is a body of men raised specifically from one people, so named after experience of war (*multitudo ex uno genere, ab exercitatio belli vocata*)’ (*Etymologies and Origins*, 9.3.58).⁹

Wolfram gives a concise description of the process of ethnogenesis, in line with the way in which it is captured in the written sources, that neatly explains how identity could be a construct of the battlefield.

*People and army are one, as soon as a people entered into the perspective of ancient ethnography. The gens is the people in arms. An astounding degree of social mobility reigned within it. Whosoever was skilful and successful in war – regardless of his ethnic and often also of his social origin – could participate. Thus, in the Kingdom of Ermanaric, there were, as well as Ostrogoths, also Finns, Antae, Heruls, Alans, Huns, Sarmatians, Esti, and perhaps even also Slavs. As well as these, Taifali, other Sarmatians and groups from Asia Minor are attested, at the same time as former Roman provincials, more or less Romanised Daco-Carpathians, as well as Iranians of all sorts of different types, in the contemporary aristocracy of the Tervingi.*¹⁰

Actual, more primordial origin, therefore, was of little import when a new people like the relatively well-attested Gothic groups, who often form the basis of such analyses, were being formed amidst the profound social stress of war.

As Wolfram’s description implies, whole groups, as well as individuals, could be grafted into a new people by this process, not least because of the extra fighting power they would add to the

confederation. The internal diversity of the ‘Goths’ who ravaged the Danubian provinces of the Roman Empire after 376 has already been described in Chap. 2: they were comprised of a number of formerly separate Gothic groups, provincial miners, and (barbarian?) deserters from the Roman army. It is possible to turn to Priscus for another revealing example. At some point in the wars following the eventual collapse of Attila’s Empire, a Hunnic war-band became surrounded and cut off by a Roman detachment (*Fragments*, 49). The barbarians show a willingness to surrender, terms are discussed, and the Roman commander forwards his report of the situation to his senior officers and awaits further orders. This anxious stand-off seems to awaken dormant social tensions within the Hunnic force, and a cunning Roman officer, who interestingly is reported to be of Hunnic descent (49.18), infiltrates the barbarian camp and starts a fight between Goths and Huns.

His strategy seems to be to divide the enemy against itself, thereby making the barbarian force more susceptible to a Roman *coup de grâce*. The plan is not wholly successful, however, probably because the Goths are merely the most numerous group among ‘the others’ (49.20), meaning that the Hunnic host is not irredeemably divided once the Romans move in, and consequently puts up a far harder fight than expected. If nothing else, episodes such as this demonstrate the profound extent to which casually deployed ethnonyms, ‘Goth’, ‘Roman’, ‘Arab’, or ‘Muslim’, can conceal a far more ambiguous, complex and potentially transient reality. It turns out that there is far more to a name than may first meet the eye.

Making ‘Muslims’ on the March

It has been suggested in the previous chapter that the texts of the ‘Abbāsīd historians are, in large part, acts of the construction of identity analogous to the western *origo gentis* tradition, whose very nature presupposes the suppression of earlier reality to suit a contemporary context. The historical tradition is also highly literary. As captured by the pen of al-Ṭabarī, it is truly Iliadic in the way it portrays the deeds of pious Muslim warriors on the battlefield. Likewise, the intimate descriptions of the ways in which Muslims seek to define themselves in polar opposition to decadent Persians like Rustam are surely later literary and societal constructs, written for reasons other than the preservation of genuine historical memory. One should anyway question the plausibility of such detailed tales being passed down from the seventh century to later ages. It would merely be wise, therefore, to treat the easy and simple use of ‘Muslim’ in sources like al-Ṭabarī with the same degree of scepticism as would a scholar of the peoples of the barbarian West treat ‘Hun’ or ‘Goth’.

It has also already been suggested that one of the ways in which the debate on the historical utility of the Islamic sources can be advanced—their highly rhetorical nature notwithstanding—is to apply a comparative perspective to offer a touchstone of plausibility for the kind of events they record. In this way, it could become possible to identify elements of the often illusive ‘solid core’ of history that many scholars seem to sense in the Islamic tradition, without always being able to pinpoint it accurately.

Like any Germanic people expanding its power beyond or within the frontiers of the West Roman Empire two centuries before the cataclysmic events of the early seventh century, the armies of the Arabian Conquests were operating in a context in which any additional manpower would surely have been welcomed. Identities were similarly also hardly as solid as those prevailing in a modern nation state. Is it possible, therefore, to catch a glimpse of the growth of the invading armies in the provinces of Persia and Rome in the early years of the conquests, in a manner resonant with the growth of western barbarian confederations? Were ‘Muslims’ made on the march, as much as were ‘Huns’? Has such a more ambiguous original social reality been lost because the Arabians, inspired by the phenomenally powerful and unifying creed that Islam certainly became, were Late Antiquity’s most successful barbarian power?

Individuals Absorbed into the Invading Army

The hugely significant, very first years of the seventh-century conquests can be analysed to test this notion. The 630s saw two major battles take place that are conventionally seen as representing the death knell of the two great empires of the ancient world: Yarmouk and al-Qādisiyyah.¹¹ The armies that fought these battles are presented in a number of influential secondary accounts as having been raised exclusively from within the Arabian Peninsula, which was putatively newly united after the alleged spread of Islam and the suppression of the *Riddah*.

Fred Donner’s still influential 1981 study, for instance, paints both the Yarmouk and the al-Qādisiyyah campaigns as very well-organised, centrally directed, short, sharp military actions, in which a force raised entirely from the Arabian Peninsula sets out to destroy the great empires of Late Antiquity.¹² Such a reconstruction is even more explicit in James Howard-Johnston’s more recent account of the seventh century, in which recruits ‘came from all over Arabia, probably in response to a general call to fight for God’s cause’, a testimony to the organisational sophistication of ‘Meccan statecraft’.¹³

There are echoes of a slightly more complex process, however, in the accounts recorded in the pages of al-Ṭabarī. A number of

individuals are explicitly attested as having joined the invading force during its march through the imperial provinces, in a manner that recalls the career of Priscus ' 'Roman Hun', yet that does not seem to have elicited the same kind of generalising deductions in the secondary historical tradition. Before the battle of al-Qādisiyyah , al-Ṭabarī recounts an *isnād* that seems to attest to the easy inclusion of a member of the Persian elite into the invading army's ranks after the battle.

According to al-Sarī – Shu'ayb – Sayf – Ṭalḥah – Bint Kaysān al-Ḍabbiyyah – a man taken prisoner at the battle of al-Qādisiyyah , who then became a virtuous Muslim, and was present when the Muslim delegation came (to Yazdagird), who said.... (History of the Prophets and Kings, 2238)¹⁴

One can infer that this former member of Shah Yazdagird's inner circle, after fighting and suffering defeat, simply chose to renegotiate his loyalty and identity as the changing circumstances dictated. Difficult though it is to know to what extent al-Ṭabarī's religious rhetoric captures the actual nature of the man in question's evolution from 'Persian courtier' to 'Muslim warrior', it is at least possible to argue that the inclusion of such an individual hints at how obliquely the lines of identity could be drawn in the heady years of the conquests. A man of such status conceivably had a lot to offer the invading army, so accepting him as one of their own was presumably of benefit to both parties.

This is not an isolated example. The early stages of the al-Qādisiyyah campaign witness another Persian commander's secession to the invading army, implying that such instances likely reflect a more general trend. Upon being told of an adverse oracle that foretold the end of the Sassanian Empire by a senior officer, a Persian commander by the name of Jushnasmāh is said to have defected to the conquering army and to have come before its leader Sa'd bin Abī Waqqāṣ . He makes a pact not only for himself and for the people of his household, but also for 'those who acceded to him' (*'ala nafsihi wa ahl baiṭhi wa man istajāba lahu*) (2253). It is naturally impossible to know for certain to whom this elliptical and tantalising comment refers, but it is hardly inconceivable that, given Jushnasmāh's position, it describes the force under his command.

This would therefore appear to be an example not just of a relatively high-status individual throwing his lot in with the invading Arabians, but also of the wider absorption of a large body of men. These men may even have fought alongside the conquerors, as Jushnasmāh is reported to have helped them in some way. It is said that Jushnasmāh became a party to the invading army's

communications (*wa kāna šāhib ijbārihim*), a phrase that may either suggest he became a spy or assisted the invaders more openly.

There is a further hint that a number of other leading men may have rapidly accommodated themselves to the invading Arabians in the response of the Persian army commanded by Rustam to the Mesopotamian locals. Rustam accuses the people living in the vicinity of al-Ḥīrah of assisting the Muslims, something that provokes a telling reply from one of the local leading men, Ibn Buqaylah. He accuses Rustam of having no fair case to make, as he can hardly be blamed for doing what was best to protect his land if the Shah's army cannot protect it for him (2255).

An account of the behaviour of the Persian army immediately prior to this conversation implies that a local man of property like Ibn Buqaylah may actually have had little reason automatically to place his faith in the imperial authorities over the invaders. When the Persians camp at Birs, a small settlement twelve miles to the southwest of ancient Babylon,¹⁵ they are said to have despoiled the locals of their possessions and to have raped their women. When some men, presumably local notables, approach Rustam to complain, they are executed (2254–2255). Probable though it may be to see the details of such events, not least the actual conversation between Ibn Buqaylah and Rustam, as containing elements of later rhetorical accretions, stories such as this nonetheless ring true to the likely behaviour of centrally controlled field armies and local notables in such a situation.

The various prisoners taken by Ṭulayḥah bin Khuwaylid al-Asadi on his series of heroicized night raids provide further examples of individuals easily grafted into the advancing army on its march to al-Qādisiyyah. Ṭulayḥah brings the men whom he does not kill back to camp, upon which they appear immediately to 'embrace Islam' and to fight with him for the duration of the subsequent war. One of the more prosaic cases, in which the prisoner also receives the name 'Muslim' like a similar example cited in the previous chapter, sufficiently demonstrates this phenomenon.

Ṭulayḥah attacked the first two men and captured the last one (wa asara al-ākira). And he brought him to Sa'd and told Sa'd (of the night's events). And he (the captive) submitted/converted to Islam (aslama), and Sa'd called him 'Muslim'. And Muslim accompanied Ṭulayḥah and was with him in all those wars of conquest (al-magāzi). (2260)

The relatively sparse episode does not make the prisoner's exact eventual status clear, but it is nonetheless apparent that he comes to fight in the army and so shares in the intensely unifying experience of

battle that probably served to obscure his former identity, reducing the differences between him and any Arabian who may have issued out of the Ḥijāz . Given examples such as this of the realignment of identity, it becomes possible to reassess the significance of the likely fate of other 'Persian captives' who appear in other accounts. Those taken by men other than Ṭulayḥah , like the large group brought into the conquerors' camp by Qays bin al-Hubayrah immediately before Ṭulayḥah (2260), could likewise have been drafted into the ranks of fighters and assimilated fairly rapidly.

There is indeed an explicit attestation of this phenomenon with respect to a man other than Ṭulayḥah at the end of an account of an Arabian delegation being sent to Rustam (2267–2269). It reads as having originated from the very first transmitter of the *isnād* that preserves the tale.

When Rustam left, I made common cause with Zuhrah (the Arabian emissary) (miltu li Zuhrah). I embraced Islam and was counted alongside him (wa kuntu lahu 'adīdan) and so he allotted to me booty as to any other man from among the fighters of al-Qādisiyyah (wa faraḍa lī farā'id ahl al-Qādisiyyah). (2269)

Like other such anecdotes, the tale of this Persian's defection poses many questions, which are impossible to answer. Did he immediately slip out of Rustam's tent, presumably located in the middle of a large Persian army, to run away with Zuhrah as the *khavar* seems to suggest? Regardless of such unfathomable difficulties, however, one is again struck by the easy evolution from 'Persian soldier' to 'Muslim warrior', and the testimony that he was treated as an equal once he found himself among the invaders' ranks. The very fact that stories such as this could be transmitted through later ages perhaps even hints at a broad recognition, at least among some early generations, of the sense of truth it resonated, of 'Persians' easily becoming 'Muslims'.

One final explicit attestation of the widespread, rapid acculturation of men who previously fought for the Sasanian Shah into the invading army is worth considering. According to al-Ṭabarī , the Persians deployed war elephants at the battle of al-Qādisiyyah . This reportedly constituted a grave threat to the Arabian army, which seemed to have trouble taking the elephants on, causing its commander Sa'd to engage expert advice as to how to bring the elephants down.

When Sa'd saw the elephants drive a wedge among the Muslim ranks and doing for a second time what the (Persians) had done on the Day of Armāth (the first day of the battle), he sent for Ḍakḥm, Muslim, Rāfi', 'Ashannaq, and their Persian companions who had embraced Islam (wa ashābihim min al-farsi alathīna aslamū).... (2324)

This is again a clear hint of perhaps quite a large element within the army being comprised of men who joined it only once it had penetrated the Persian provinces. The contribution of these men to their new cause, in this case at least, was hardly a marginal one: they identified the elephants' weak spots and instructed a select band of fighters as to how to take down the Persians on the elephants' howdah. Al-Ṭabarī's description of this day of the battle of al-Qādisiyyah makes it possible to believe that, if the invading army had not had access to such expert insights, victory may not have been as forthcoming as it was. It was evidently not a victory won solely by hardy, warrior Bedouin from the Arabian Peninsula, but also, at least according to al-Ṭabarī, by men who, in a previous life, had fought in the very ranks of the army they now sought to defeat.

Groups Absorbed into the Invading Army

Accounts such as this testify to the easy inclusion not just of individuals into the invading army, but also, and more significantly, of whole groups. Al-Ṭabarī's account may be quite clear that men were raised from the vastness of the Arabian Peninsula for the al-Qādisiyyah campaign—such as those from the Hawāzin (2216) and those from a place called Zarūd, on the pilgrim route between the Ḥijāz and al-Kūfah (2220)—but it is likewise apparent that the army was joined by groups from within the provinces of both Persia and Rome.

The most detailed example of this process, the conclusion of a raid on the bridal party of the sister of the Sasanian governor of al-Ḥīrah, is revealing on two accounts.

And so the Muslims glorified God, shouting 'God is most great' vigorously. Sa'd (bin Abī Waqqās) said: 'I swear by God, you have glorified God as a people in whom I recognise might/honour (al-'izz)'. And so Sa'd allotted the fifth of his spoils to the Muslims (fa-qasama ḍalik Sa'd 'alā al-muslimīna fa-al-khums nafalihū), and gave to the warriors the remainder of it (wa 'itā al-mujāhidīn baqīyatihū). It was welcome to them. And Sa'd stationed in 'Udhayb horsemen to guard the women, and the guardians of all the women joined the troop and he set over them (as their commander) Ghālib bin 'Abdallāh al-Laythī (wa inḍama ilāhā ḥāṭatu kull ḥarīm wa ammara 'alāhim Ghālib bin 'Abdallāh al-Laythī). (2233)

The first important insight is that the raiding party that was dispatched from the army is itself clearly composed of two distinct groups. There are those who are explicitly called 'Muslims', who receive the fifth (*al-khums*) as mandated in the Qur'ān as the part of

the booty, which is to be donated to the Muslim community as a single entity (*Sūrat al-Anfāl*, 8.41).¹⁶ There is another, separate group who are termed the ‘warriors’ (*mujāhidūn*).¹⁷ The very fact that the spoils that they receive are not a part of the community’s fifth demonstrates that these men, who nonetheless appear to have been fighting in the army for some time, are undeniably not Muslim.

This extremely valuable *khabar*, which provides further reason to question al-Ṭabarī’s otherwise unproblematic and generalising use of the term ‘Muslim’ to describe the armies of the conquests, conceivably points to a number of conclusions. First, it could attest to the likelihood that Islam as a faith, as distinct from political allegiance to the followers of the prophet in Medina, did not rapidly spread throughout Arabia, among the *ahl al-riddah*, as the Islamic tradition would suppose (the ‘warriors’ appear to have been in the army for some time and so potentially originated from the peninsula). Secondly and similarly, this division could imply that only the inner core of the armies—the bearers, it could be said, of the Islamic *Traditionskern*—were adherents of Muḥammad. Thirdly, the easy cooperation of Muslims and potentially a far larger number of non-Muslims in the same conquest project also undermines the notion that the seventh-century conquests were motivated above all by ‘Islam’. It is hard to see how these ‘warriors’ were inspired by the new, nascent faith’s alleged ‘active fatalism’, to behave as ‘in essence ordered arrays of suicide fighters, endowed with extraordinary courage and daring’.¹⁸

Such an explicit and detailed division between ‘Muslims’ and ‘warriors’ may admittedly be rare, but it is not unique. Similar language is used slightly later in al-Ṭabarī’s narrative of the al-Qādisiyyah campaign, with reference to the division of the spoils after another raid.

And so Sa’d distributed the fish among the people (al-nās) and allotted the animals and the booty of the fifth, exclusive of what was given (of the booty) to the warriors (illā mā ruddi ‘alā al-mujāhidīn). (2244)

Again, the *mujāhidūn* appear to be separated from those eligible for the Muslim community’s fifth, as they neither receive it nor are included within the community labelled the ‘people’ (*al-nās*) who do. This, therefore, would seem to be a further reference to a group who were not Muslim, yet who were fighting alongside Muslims (there is no reason to believe that this group of ‘warriors’ corresponded exactly to the earlier attested group). The very fact that both groups receive a share of the spoils of war, moreover, implies that ‘Muslims’ and ‘warriors’ were fighting essentially as equals.

It is highly tempting to argue that that these two *akhbār* recollect a memory of a time before the full articulation of Islam as a religion and

widespread conversion to it, when the original diversity of the armies of the conquest were recognised and still broadly socially acceptable. Such important distinctions as that between 'Muslim' and 'warrior' may subsequently have been blurred, then lost completely, over the generations of oral transmission. A more self-confident and self-conscious Muslim community would have come to see anything other than a 'Muslim Conquest' as inherently implausible, and therefore to have adjusted the language of its history accordingly.

There is a second important insight from the story of the division of the bridal party spoils. The 'Persian soldiers' who are guarding the retinue of the Sasanian governor's sister immediately join the invading army, and are incorporated into its ranks not as individual clients like the prisoners of Ṭulayḥah, but apparently as a whole unit under a new Arabian commander, Ghālib bin 'Abdallah al-Laythī. Are these men yet another group of 'warriors' who will share further spoils of war with the 'Muslims', eventually becoming all but indistinct from them as the years of fighting together, travelling throughout the Near East, made old identities meaningless?

This thought-provoking *khābar* is doubly interesting as it fails to record that the new recruits 'embraced Islam'. Former Persian soldiers simply become easily assimilated into the invading force, and no doubt continue their exploits in written history as 'Muslim' warriors. In light of episodes such as this, it becomes possible to imagine that al-Ṭabarī was not simply speaking metaphorically when he notes how, in the run-up to the battle of al-Qādisiyyah, the strength of the army increased daily, as that of the Persians grew weaker day by day (2243).

There are a raft of other *akhbār*, though generally less detailed and incisive, that strongly imply that there was a far more contingent, less fanatical, and even slightly chaotic element to the growth of the armies of the conquest than certain trends in the secondary tradition have acknowledged. The army invading Iraq appears even to have swelled its ranks by force, in a manner similar to what one can imagine was the somewhat coerced nature of Gothic manpower in the wars of Attila the Hun.

According to al-Sari – Shu'ayb – Sayf – Abu 'Amr – Abu 'Uthman al-Nahdi, who said: when 'Umar dispatched Sa'd to Persia he told him to take any man of strength, valour and leadership that he encountered in any of the oases on the way. And if anyone should refuse, he was to conscript him (fa-in abā intakhabahu). And so 'Umar commanded, and Sa'd came to al-Qādisiyyah with twelve thousand men, from among those who took part in the days of battle and from the people of non-Arabs (min ahl al-ayaum wa 'unās min al-ḥamrā') who

answered the Muslims and so helped them. Some embraced Islam before the fighting, some embraced Islam afterwards. They were made participants in the spoils and so shares in the spoils were given to them just as to those (others) who took part in the battle of al-Qādisiyyah (fa'ushrikū fī al-'ġanīma wa furiḍat lahum farā'iḍ ahl al-qādisiyyah). (2261)

This *khavar* is revealing on a number of levels beyond the hint that recruits were drafted unwillingly. It is once again clear that an acceptance of Islam—whatever that actually may have meant in the early seventh century—was not a criterion for participation in the conquests. This is explicitly recognised even though al-Ṭabarī composed his history in an age when, as has been suggested with reference to the division between ‘warriors’ and ‘Muslims’, it is probable that such details were subject to social pressure to be excised to suit a more thoroughly Islamic society.

Perhaps the most important nugget of information the *khavar* preserves, however, is the insistence, as was the case with respect to the ‘warriors’ and ‘Muslims’, that all have an equal share in the spoils. The armies of the conquests therefore seem freely to have welcomed anyone who was able to fight, and to have rewarded him accordingly, regardless of his former social identity.

Ethnic diversity is also attested in the *khavar*, suggesting just how wide the boundaries of recruitment could be drawn. A further, more significant, and thoroughly explicit, example of this tendency is found slightly later in al-Ṭabarī's narrative. Towards the end of his account of the battle of al-Qādisiyyah, al-Ṭabarī records that the army was assisted—it is unclear how, or whether assistance specifically at al-Qādisiyyah is meant—by what would seem to be further military elements seceding from Persia, and also by a people known as the Daylamīs.

According to al-Sarī – Shu'ayb – Sayf – Muḥammad, Ṭalḥah, and Ziyād, who said: The Daylamīs and the leaders of the soldiers who answered the Muslims and fought with them and did not embrace Islam (wa ru'asā' al-masāliḥ alathīna istajābū lilmuslimīna wa qātalū ma'hum 'alā 'ġair al-islām) said, 'Our brethren who became Muslims from the beginning have better judgement and are more virtuous than us...'. (2340–2341)

The apparent defection of what are apparently described as an indefinite number of Persian contingents certainly rings true to the earlier examples of the easy assimilation of former ‘Persian soldiers’ into the ranks of the invader.

Of similar significance is the wholesale defection of what may

have been a uniform ethnic unit serving in the Persian army: the Daylamīs . Daylam is a mountainous area bordering the Caspian Sea, which seems to have had a reputation for breeding peculiarly hardy warriors in antiquity .¹⁹ They may well have been attracted to the Arab cause by the chance to share in the spoils exacted from their erstwhile imperial overlords; the *khavar* makes it clear that the majority of them did not embrace Islam. It is noticeable that the grafting of the Daylamīs into the invading army has not received any attention in the major secondary works on the conquests , an absence that suggests how their emphasis on centrally planned, all but universally religiously inspired campaigns, has obscured important details that help to explain the conquests' success.²⁰

A further issue to consider is the strong sense, which emerges from the pages of al-Ṭabarī , that the invading armies were joined by the erstwhile imperial Arabian clients and subjects of Persia and Rome. This sense first resonates from the remarks of the Persian commander Rustam in a session of parley before fighting begins on the field of al-Qādisiyyah.

According to al-Sarī – Shu'ayb – Sayf – al-Naḍr – Ibn al-Rufaul – his father, who said: Rustam camped near al-'Atīq and spent the night there. The next morning, he went to survey the situation and thereby to guess the number of Muslims...He said (to Zuhrah, an emissary from the invading army), among other things:

You are our neighbours (jīrānunā) and a number of you have been under our rule (wa qad kānat ṭā'ifa minkum fī sulṭāninā). And we were good as their neighbours, we have warded harm away from them and have bestowed many useful things upon them. We have protected them among the people of their desert, and have permitted them to graze their flocks on our land, and have bestowed upon them victuals from our country. (2267–2268)

Despite, as ever, the inherent problems of this account—how could such detail have been recollected by someone who found himself fighting a large battle the next day and preserved intact over several generations?—Rustam's words are nonetheless suggestive. They imply that Arabian groups, living in and along the Persian frontier, and who had formerly enjoyed quite a symbiotic relationship with the Sasanians, had now turned against their former patrons. Rustam again digresses on this theme before another messenger from the invading army at a later point in the narrative (2276).

Such comments capture a hardly unlikely state of affairs. Liminal Arabian groups of the type to which Rustam seems to be alluding were

never culturally integrated into the Sasanian Empire. They acted as imperial dependents largely because the balance of resources and of coercion was so one-sided. Once this simple fact was changed by the appearance and growth of a large force opposed to the regime in Ctesiphon on imperial soil, however, political allegiance could also shift, perhaps inevitably.

A similar phenomenon is evident in the Roman provinces. After the battle of Yarmouk, the invading army fights a number of engagements with the Roman forces left in the area and eventually defeats a Roman detachment outside Qinnasrīn, a town a day's journey south of Aleppo.²¹ They then besiege the city and conduct operations in its hinterland, which leads to the Muslim commander, Khālīd bin al-Walīd, receiving an interesting message from the locals.

With respect to the people who lived around (Qinnasrīn), they sent a message to Khālīd, (saying) that they were Arabs (wa ammā ahl al-hāḍiri fa-arsalū ilā Khālīd annahum 'arab)...it was not their idea to fight him. And so Khālīd accepted this of them and left them alone. (2393)

As was the case in the Persian provinces, there appears to have been a considerable element of the Roman provincial population that, even if they are not here attested as having joined the invading army, at least shed no tears for the eclipse of Roman power. This speaks to the possibility that the entry of the invading army into the imperial provinces, in a manner similar to the impact of the Germanic invasions in the fifth-century Roman West, could unleash simmering social tensions that reduced Roman power and resistance from within.

There are, in addition to this phenomenon, and also more significantly, explicit attestations of Roman federate forces slipping out of imperial service and into the ranks of the invaders. In the account of the battle of Yarmouk that al-Ṭabarī claims to have taken directly from Ibn Ishāq, a variety of distinct Arabian clients are reported to have served in the Roman army. There are members of the 'Lakhm, Judhām, Balqayn, Balī, and 'Āmila (who were) tribes joined to the Quḍā'ah and Ghassān' (2347), as well as other named groups like Armenians, in the Roman force. Two of these tribes are reported to have gone over to the Arabian invaders at an uncertain point in the Yarmouk campaign.

When the Muslims confronted the Romans, men from the tribes of Lakhm and Judhām joined them. When these people saw the severity of the fighting, they fled and sought refuge in the neighbouring villages.... (2347)

The apparent eventual cowardice of these Roman defectors does nothing to diminish the important point that—without being said to have ‘embraced Islam’—they joined the invading army. There is a further hint, slightly later in the narrative of the conquest of Syria, that erstwhile Roman federates indeed contributed to the manpower of the ‘Muslim’ army in a far more permanent way than the lacklustre Lakhm and Judhām. The *isnād* of a *khavar* that tells of the capture of Ḥimṣ is recorded as having entered the historical tradition via the agency of ‘elders from Ghassān and Balqayn’ (2391), implying that they were a part of the society that emerged during and after the conquest period.

The Disparate Origins of a New Society

A consideration of the very first years of the seventh-century conquests as they are presented in the Islamic historical tradition, as recorded by al-Ṭabarī, has demonstrated the likelihood that there was a far more complex process behind the invasion of the imperial provinces than the simple military victory of a wholly intrusive group. Individuals and larger bodies of men who had never set foot in the Ḥijāz or probably anywhere else in the Arabian Peninsula, found themselves fighting in an army, whose inner core at least the evidence would suggest thought of themselves as ‘Muslims’.

As the campaigns dragged on, these men are increasingly likely to have lost their original sense of social identity, and to have absorbed that of the army’s leading men—the genuine ‘Muslims.’ So much can only be surmised, deeply likely though the comparative evidence theorised by the Vienna School would make it, but it is anyway clear that the armies of the conquest did grow in stages, probably because initial success attracted more recruits, who helped to breed further success. Al-Ṭabarī’s description of the development of the *‘aṭā*, the system of military pay, indeed details the various stipends paid to groups depending on when they had joined the army (2411–2413). This acknowledgement of gradualism and contingency—phenomena usually excluded from the manner in which the seventh-century conquests are portrayed in the secondary tradition—questions the degree to which the conquests can genuinely be said to have been born out of a uniform sense of religious mission. It may be quite telling that, among the groups listed as receiving a military stipend, are ‘the Christians’ (*al-‘ibād*) (2413).

There is a further question to consider, however. Why was the accretion to the invading army of individuals and groups who lived inside the imperial provinces apparently, as the sources suggest, so easy? Many of the frontier groups recorded as having joined the ‘Muslim’ army seem to have been relatively indistinct from the

invaders themselves, allowing an easy transition from an old to a new political loyalty and eventually social identity. Can the success of the seventh-century conquests be understood, therefore, in some respects as a story somehow dependent on, and subsequent to, a broader phenomenon of late antique ethnogenesis amongst the previously more disparate tribes of Arabia?

Footnotes

1

R.C. Blockley, ed., *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus and Malchus* (Liverpool, 1983).

2

W. Pohl, 'Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition: A Response', in A. Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Brepols: Turnhout, 2002) 221–239; 221 for the claim of the Vienna School to have destroyed a concept that had a profound impact on German history in the twentieth century. The insights of Wenskus and his successors in many ways prefigured the similarly influential approach to modern nationalism pioneered by Benedict Anderson, not least in B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso: London and New York, 1983).

3

T. Noble, 'Introduction: Romans, barbarians, and the transformation of the Roman Empire', T. Noble, ed., *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms* (Routledge: London & New York, 2006) 1–27 offers a useful summary of ethnogenesis theory. See W. Pohl, 'Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity', in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz, eds., *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800* (Brill: Leiden, 1998) 17–69 for the variety and relative importance of the elements that can fall under the German term *Verfassung*.

4

C. Bowlus, 'Ethnogenesis: The Tyranny of a Concept', in Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity*, 241–256 is a polemic example. It may also be worth noting at this juncture that applying the theory of ethnogenesis to late antique Arabia in a manner mirroring its use by the Vienna School in the West has received criticism in P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), for example at 60–96. Webb is content to use the term, but does so to describe what he sees as the far later, far more textual invention of the notion of shared Arab kinship by later generations of Muslims (see above all his concluding remarks at 352–359). For further brief comments on Webb's work, refer to Chap. 1.

5

W. Pohl, 'Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition', in Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity*, 231–

6

P. Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development and the Birth of Europe* (London, 2009) 230.

7

H. Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen Zwischen Antike und Mittelalter* (Berlin, 1990) 195 for 'Roman Hun.'

8

P. Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 230–231, follows his optimistic assessment of Hunnic multiculturalism with such a caveat. He also points out that barbarian empires often erected ethnic barriers within the wider confederation to create an internal hierarchy, although it is important to point out that the very assertion of such barriers could presuppose a period of mixing, in which such barriers were obscure and less significant.

9

W. M. Lindsay, ed., *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX* (Oxford, 1911). In this way, Isidore seems to give a human identity to the term *exercitus*, thereby distinguishing it from more utilitarian terms of military organisation.

10

H. Wolfram, 'Einleitung oder Überlegungen', in H. Wolfram and W. Pohl, eds., *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern I* (Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften: Vienna, 1990) 19–31; 22 for the quote. Wolfram commits a minor anachronism in the use of the term 'Ostrogoth', otherwise his reconstruction is accurate.

11

H. Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (Longman: Harlow, 1986) for example, identifies Yarmouk as the last battle to see the deployment of any major Roman force in the field (61) and al-Qādisiyyah as a defeat so total that Persian Iraq then fell completely into the invaders' hands (67). This presentation actually appears to ignore al-Ṭabarī's accounts of continued Persian resistance during the first attempts to settle at al-Baṣrah (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2377–2389) and the battles of Marj al-Rūm (2389–2390), Qinnasrīn (2393) and Ajnādayn (2399–2400) in Palestine, all of which are described as major engagements.

12

F. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981) 221–222.

13

J. Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010) 468; 471 for 'Meccan statecraft'. It is interesting to note that Howard -Johnston often appears to rely on Donner's *The Early Islamic Conquests*, which he cites as a reference for his own presentation of events on 464–469, as well as showing a debt to it in his introduction on 5.

14

M. J. de Goeje, ed., *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari* Vol. 4 (Brill, 1879–1901).

15

E. Herzfeld, 'Birs', in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Brill Online) accessed 24 May 2015.

16

Al-qur'ān al-karīm (Sefa Yayıncılık: İstanbul, 1923).

17

For the nature of the fifth, see A. Zysow and R. Gleave, 'Khums', in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Brill Online) accessed 24 May 2015.

18

Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses*, 451.

19

V. Minorsky, 'Daylam', in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Brill Online) accessed 24 May 2015.

20

The secession of the Daylamīs receives no mention, for example, in either Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age*, or Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*. It may also be telling that this interesting account of the people of Daylam is likewise not mentioned in the eponymous entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

N. Elisséeff, 'Ḳinnasrīn', in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition* (Brill Online) accessed 25 May 2015.

6. From Clients to Conquerors

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Abstract

The discipline of Frontier Studies has highlighted how borders, over time, have been areas of intense interaction rather than division, giving rise to societies on either side that become increasingly distant from their interiors. Rome's tendency to contract frontier defence out to federate groups helped to catalyse this process, as the final chapter argues in a diachronic discussion of her Arabian clients. The chapter contends that imperial involvement in the peninsula led to the creation of larger, more powerful, and more culturally self-confident groups who become ever harder for their masters to control. An analysis of the Greek sources for the outbreak of the seventh-century conquests stresses not only their value as history through a new argument for their reliability, but also the previously under-emphasised insight they reveal. After the Last Great War of Antiquity, Rome's Arabian clients joined the armies riding out of the Ḥijāz to become her conquerors.

KeywordsFrontierFederateGhassānTheophanesNicephorus

*When Rustam stopped at al-Najaf, he sent one of his men as a spy (minhā 'aīnān) to the Muslim camp. And so he was immersed among them at al-Qādisiyyah, just as if he were one of them who had wondered away from them (kaba'ḍ man nadda minhum), and so he saw them clean their teeth with toothpicks at each prayer.... (al-Ṭabarī , *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2290–2291)¹*

This short anecdote reveals far more than the subtlety of the Persian intelligence operation prior to the battle of al-Qādisiyyah. One of the most striking aspects of the way in which the individuals and groups presented in the previous chapter seemed to have flitted

between fighting for Rome, or Persia, or for the invading army, was just how easy they apparently found it to be. The ease of this transition is again glimpsed in the tale of Rustam's agent. Despite being a 'Persian soldier', he seems to have had no difficulty in passing himself off as a member of the invading army. Clear differences of language, appearance or behaviour—or anything else that could have given him away—do not seem to have existed, despite his evident surprise at the conquering army's dental habits. He appears simply as 'one of them'.

This *khavar* is strikingly concordant with a number of very similar tales from the frontier lands of the Roman and Germanic World, as recorded in the Western late antique historians. A tale pertaining to the difficulty that the Emperor Theodosius the Great experienced when trying to combat barbarian raids in the Balkan provinces springs to mind. The provincials report that the barbarians commit their depredations by night, and disappear completely by daybreak. Taking matters directly into his own hands, the emperor and a select band of guards ride through Macedonia to try to investigate this curious situation themselves.

When the imperial party stops at an inn, they see another guest sitting quietly in the corner, keeping himself to himself. This cold reticence prompts the emperor to ask the innkeeper about him, and he is told how this standoffish patron had been staying there for some days, always left early in the morning, and returned exhausted at night. Sensing that something was not quite right, Theodosius has his men interrogate him and he eventually confesses to being a barbarian spy (κατάσκοπος): the diurnal eyes and ears of the nocturnal raiders (Zosimus, *New History*, 4.48).²

As was the case with Rustam's spy, the enemy agent appears to have been able to move unrecognised as an outsider over Roman territory, and presumably to have conversed and interacted with locals with no difficulty, given that he was staying at a local inn. Outsiders, therefore, appear very similar to insiders. Tales such as these raise a number of interesting questions. What, and who, exactly was a 'barbarian' in the Roman West? What, and who, was an 'Arabian' or 'Muslim' in the years of the seventh-century conquests, when they can appear so similar to the soldiers of the imperial armies arrayed against them?

Recasting the Frontier

The story of Theodosius and the barbarian spy, and others like it, have formed part of the evidential basis of an understanding of the nature of the Roman frontier radically different from earlier notions of the *limes* as a sharply drawn, strictly territorial, 'moral border' dividing

the civilised world from the vast wastes of barbarian savagery beyond.³ Christopher Whittaker actually uses this self-same example in his paradigmatic re-analysis of the imperial frontier.⁴ As the very Latin term suggests, the Roman frontier, the *limes*, was not a barrier of strict demarcation, but rather a zone defined by routes of communication. Some classical sources may occasionally suggest that their author conceived of the frontier in very much the manner of a nineteenth or twentieth century European statesman. Detailed analyses of these sources, however, and a recognition that such a more modern world-view has prejudiced later constructions of the Roman frontier, has shown that 'ideology is no guide to the reality of the frontiers'.⁵ The Roman *limes* was not one long Maginot Line.

Roman borderlands were areas of intense communication and cross-fertilisation, rather than silent walls erected between two mutually exclusive cultures. The frontier covered wide tracts of land within and beyond the convenient lines on the map that pepper modern diagrams of the Roman Empire. Imperial power ebbed and flowed far beyond static fortifications guarding lines of communication like rivers. The *limes* could also occasionally represent a band of intense Romanisation between external and internal frontiers, as seems to have been the case when Theodosius travelled along the *limes* only to combat barbarians *inside* Roman Macedonia.

It is significant that the exigencies of empire, as well as the natural proximity bred of geography, encouraged barbarians and Romans to interact intensely at the frontier. The subsistence requirements of troops stationed in the frontier zone gave barbarian producers a ready market, as much as the barbarian world's manpower offered Rome a ready recruitment ground and tribal chiefs willing to do the empire's bidding in return for the wealth and status alliance could provide. Over the years, especially from the third century, acculturation started to produce frontier societies that 'came to resemble each other more than their own hinterlands'.⁶

This process was exaggerated among the class of men who historically were such an integral part of the empire, yet who straddled the frontier zone more than other group by Late Antiquity : the army. In the Western Roman Empire of the fifth century, disentangling a Roman soldier from a barbarian warrior became not only ever more difficult, but ever more meaningless, as the federate, ostensibly Germanic armies of the empire started to become new peoples forged in war, politically distinct from the empire rather than the dependents of it. Thus it is possible, in a somewhat extreme formulation, for some to say that the 'Germanic world was perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of Roman political and military genius'.⁷

The transformative power of the Roman frontier is of unquestioned centrality to the story of the fifth-century invasions and the birth of medieval Europe. An appreciation of the ways in which the imperial frontier may socially, culturally, and politically have conditioned the eastern frontier in the centuries before Islam, however, has been far slower to develop, as has already been noted in Chap. 2. There are increasingly insightful exceptions, however, even beyond Irfan Shahīd's monumental, if not occasionally problematic, series covering the centuries-long interaction between what he prefers to call Byzantium and the Arabs.⁸ One recent work, and the similarly already cited essay collections by the same author, has taken the theory of ethnogenesis and the study of frontiers as the starting point for a deeper understanding of the Roman and Persian Arabian client communities, the Ghassān and the Lakhm.⁹ Yet it remains fair to say that the Frontier Studies approach remains largely limited to the eastern *limes* in the centuries before the conquests, rather than during the conquest period itself.

The Arabian frontier, despite profound differences in climate, geography, and in the histories of the surrounding settled areas, experienced the same kind of political, social, and cultural processes as did the *limes* of the Roman West. Contrary to some earlier misconceptions of the border zone that over-estimated the extent, durability, and likely effectiveness of liminal fortifications, Rome, even in the days of the High Empire, sought accommodation with the tribes on her Arabian periphery.¹⁰ This process ultimately led to the rise of the Ghassān as something approaching a state within the empire. The Sasanian Empire's Arabian clients, notably the Lakhm of al-Ḥīrah, seem to have been subject to very similar processes, even though limitations to the available evidence seems to have so far prevented as full a documentation of their history.¹¹

The processes such political interaction catalysed were profound. Groups like the Ghassān seem to have started to develop a more self-conscious internal group identity, demonstrated not only in their growth and consequent greater military and political significance, but also in their use of the Arabic language. These developments progressively set them apart from the very empire they served and appear to have been a manifestation of a wider phenomenon. This nascent identity, importantly, does not seem to have prevented Arabians in Late Antiquity from being caught up in wider cultural trends, not least in the age's deep religiosity. As much as the chaos of the fifth century set the stage for the consummation of new identities that had been fermenting on the Roman marches for centuries, it is hardly inconceivable that a crisis in the east, and the appearance of a movement that spoke in some ways to what could tentatively be

thought of as a nascent ethnic consciousness, could have resulted in a similarly epochal transformation. In the thought-provoking and suggestive Greek sources for the early years of the seventh-century conquests, it becomes possible to glimpse the Roman roots of some of the men remembered by their descendants as the fanatical agents of God's will.

Ethnogenesis in Arabia in Late Antiquity

The Geographical Context

First, it is important to be clear about geography and terminology. What does 'Arabia' mean in Late Antiquity? As a geographical zone, Arabia should be thought to include not only the territory of the modern Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman, but also the Transjordan, the Syrian Desert, and northern Mesopotamia: the area known in Arabic as *al-jazīra* ('the island'). This is a vast area of land. It covers an area slightly larger than the Indian subcontinent, a fact that often escapes Westerners familiar with the distortions of the Mercator projection of the globe.¹² Apart from the southern tip of the peninsula, which receives seasonally generous amounts of rainfall from the Indian monsoon, most of the region registers only 100–350 mm of rainfall per year.¹³

The difference in rainfall has naturally led to the evolution of different ecosystems and divergent subsistence patterns. The deep desert has traditionally been home to camel-driving nomads, who travel in small tenting groups, living an austere existence in a landscape that seems to defy life itself. This kind of inhospitable territory is at its most extreme in the *Rub al-Khālī* – the Empty Quarter – the second-largest sand desert in the world, in modern south central Saudi Arabia. Closer to the Fertile Crescent, however, is found a zone transitional between the desert proper and land where settled agriculture becomes possible. This steppe-land supports the grazing of flocks of sheep and goats. The transitional zone has always been a land of intense contact between nomads and settled villagers, whose different lifestyles offer mutually beneficial advantages from trade.¹⁴ Camel drivers, who would enter the transitional zone in the summer, have also always enjoyed year-long contact with settled groups clustering around the many oases that are found throughout Arabia, with whom they have historically developed long-lasting familial, as well as subsistence, relationships.

It is important to note how the geography of this huge area helped to set the conditions for the development of a cultural zone. The three, admittedly schematically drawn, groups of peninsula dwellers—camel drivers, the flock herders of the steppe and settled agriculturalists —

have always been compelled by the imperatives of landscape and ecology to come into contact with one another.¹⁵ This contact was not always peaceful, but different groups living entirely divergent lifestyles interacted regularly, throughout history, and, via such interaction, were induced slowly to forge common cultural traits with the potential to lead to the evolution of shared identities.

This, interestingly, may help to explain why the term ‘Arab’ is one of great antiquity, even though its use and exact meaning over the ages is open to debate, as mentioned in Chap. 1. It is first attested in Assyrian and Biblical texts written between the ninth and the fifth centuries BC, which apply it to the pastoral tribes of the desert.¹⁶ The very fact that these two different cultural traditions use the same term may be significant. It implies that it could have originated from the desert dwellers themselves, and could even hint at the rudimentary existence of a sense of shared origin and descent among at least some tribes of North Arabia.

Rome and North Arabia

Cultural and political unity, however, was millennia in the making and, like all things in history, was hardly inevitable. The Arabia that Rome encountered when her armies started to dominate the Near East from the first century BC contained many distinct cultural zones as well as political entities. Arabia encompassed the highly developed Sabaean states of the south, whose origins stretched back to the tenth century BC, the Aramaic-speaking kingdoms of the north, like Nabataea, and a menagerie of nomadic and settled tribes in between. Various languages and dialects were spoken, various gods and goddesses were worshipped, and the various societies found between the Euphrates and the Ḥaḍramawt in Yemen were of shifting and diverse complexity.¹⁷

The term ‘Arab’, it should be noted, actually seems to have had a restricted application for high classical authors. Roman historians tend to use it in relation to wars fought against tribal groups in Mesopotamia, or in the region of the Syrian steppe, rather than on the Transjordan marches of the peninsula proper.¹⁸ ‘Arab’ also did not describe the kind of people—desert dwelling Bedouin—a modern reader would probably expect. It could quite easily describe the heavily Romanised inhabitants of the *Provincia Arabia*, which was established when the Emperor Trajan annexed the Kingdom of Nabataea in 106 AD. Yet it is clear that Arabian groups from the peninsula and the border lands of the empire came to play an ever more important role in the life and politics of the empire from the third century, in a manner similar to that of federate groups in Roman Europe. They start to appear in the sources as ‘Saracens’.

The term ‘Saracen’ is one of contested origin. Its original application, however, is quite clear. Ammianus Marcellinus, the fourth-century Roman general and historian, who had first-hand experience of the Near East, demonstrates that when the Romans of his day used the term, they were referring specifically to desert nomads. When digressing on the geography of Egypt, for example, he notes the existence of ‘Scenitic Arabs, whom we now call Saracens’ (*History*, 22.15.2).¹⁹ The word ‘scenitic’ is formed from the Greek for ‘tent’, σκηνή. ‘Saracen’, therefore, first entered the Roman lexicon as a technical term for desert nomad.

Many possible etymologies for ‘Saracen’ have been suggested. They range from a derivation from the Aramaic *serāk*, meaning empty—putatively used by settled groups to describe the inhabitants of the empty sands—to a claim to biblical fame as a reference to Sarah, the Egyptian bondwoman who gave birth to Abraham’s son Ishmael.²⁰ Two etymologies in particular, however, deserve a greater degree of exploration. One of them is dependent on one of the five third-century dedicatory inscriptions from Ruwwāfa in the northern Ḥijāz—the site of a temple to the Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus—that attest not just to the rule of a Roman governor far to the south of what most maps give as the borders of the Roman province, but also to the presence of a local Arabian group that seems to have fallen under Rome’s sway.²¹ These people are described in the Greek text of the inscription as *Thamoudēnōn ethnos*—the nation of the Thamūd—something that the Nabataean Aramaic text gives as *šrkt tmwdw*.²² Debate focuses on what exactly the terms *ethnos* and *šrkt* mean in this context, in this location, and at this time. One intriguing suggestion is that *šrkt tmwdw* translates as something approaching ‘the company/confederation of the Thamūd’—the Semitic term *šrkt* being the root of the Arabic word *šarikat*, used even today as the term for ‘company’.²³

‘Saracen’, according to this interpretation, probably entered the dictionary of Roman commanders on the eastern *limes* from northern Arabian dialects. It may have referred to what groups of Arabians called themselves when they banded together either to seek defence from or cooperation with the superpower of the settled areas to their West (the inscription records not just Thamūd, but a united group of them).²⁴ This quite specific application of the term would neatly explain why ‘Saracen’ was used in Late Antiquity to describe federate groups from Arabia who fought for the empire.

This proposed etymology is not, however, without its problems. Other contemporary inscriptions by Arabian tribesmen use only one word to describe tribal or other social group formations: *ʾl*.²⁵ *Ethnos*, in its Latin translation *natio*, is used elsewhere in the Roman Empire in the third century to refer to units of the Roman army raised from

specific, non-Roman groups. The word *šrkt*, according to this formulation, therefore must have had a far more restrictive meaning than ‘confederation’. It must have meant something approaching ‘military unit’ and may not have been an emic term at all. The proponent of this interpretation, Michael Macdonald, on the basis that it would be unusual for a whole swathe of desert dwellers to be named after such a narrowly defined group, consequently prefers to derive ‘Saracen’ from an Arabic verb meaning ‘to migrate to the inner desert’.²⁶ It is certainly possible, therefore, that ‘Saracen’ entered the Roman lexicon from a term used by sedentary provincials to describe their nomad neighbours.

Whatever the significance of the Ruwwāfa inscription for the etymology of ‘Saracen’, it nonetheless provides deeper insights into the nature of second century Arabian nomad society. It is clear that the Thamūd are not in anything approaching a symmetrical relationship with Rome. Both the Greek and the Nabataean Aramaic elements of the inscription not only lavish praise upon the emperors, they also note that the temple was raised as a result of the ‘encouragement’ of the Roman governor Antistius Adventus.²⁷ This diplomatic language cannot but reveal in whose favour the balance of political agency lay.

The medium of the inscription is also important. The entire temple complex is as much a symbol of the cultural capital of Rome as it is a symbol of loyalty to the emperors. The inscription does not, moreover, use the language of the Thamūd, which is epigraphically attested to the north of the Ḥijāz in the Syrian steppe. It uses the local languages of political power: Nabataean Aramaic and, of course, the Greek of the Roman Empire. This is important for three reasons. First, it attests to a dependency on the Roman Empire for the articulation of complex political arrangements. Secondly, this suggests a lack of native proto-state political institutions and developed political thought. Thirdly, the use of Aramaic in particular—one is less surprised at the Greek—also suggests a lack of collective cultural self-confidence, even though individual members of the Thamūd could elsewhere express themselves in their own dialect and script.

The political underdevelopment of the Thamūd stands in sharp contrast to the situation that progressively becomes evident in Late Antiquity. Federate Arabian groups, not least their rulers, start to appear ever more culturally self-confident, as much as they were ever more significant to the defence of the frontier. Epigraphy remains a useful guide for tracing this development—perceived though it can be in the written sources—as it is far more of an emic medium than the tradition represented by the Classical authors. It is possible, therefore, to approach Rome’s Arabian clients in their words, in their own

Probably the earliest and one of the most important indications of the development of larger tribal confederations, more powerful leaders, and cross-tribal identities is the epitaph of a man traditionally known as Imrū'l Qais . Translations of his epitaph have alternately honoured him with the title 'King of all the Arabs' or 'king of all 'Arab'.²⁹ This hyperbolic titulature, the first of which refers to rule over people, the second of which probably to rule over a large part of northern Mesopotamia, should not conceal the good reasons for considering the epitaph the most important pre-Islamic inscription from the Near East.³⁰ 'L Qais was buried inside the *Provincia Arabia* at Nemāra—about 50 kilometres to the north of the provincial capital Bostra—in 328. The at first somewhat surprising disjunction between a Roman location and a grand, sovereign title can be explained by recognising 'L Qais as a quasi-independent ally, who enjoyed a royal title among his people yet who was nonetheless a subject of the empire, largely dependent on it for his status and the wealth that consolidated that status.³¹

The use of the title of 'king', *mlk*, is important. It leads one to expect that 'L Qais exercised suzerainty over a number of separate Arabian groups—something that later lines of the inscription confirm—and that he was consequently a far more significant individual than were the nameless chiefs of the Thamūd . This remains overwhelmingly likely even if one were to read the epitaph as being more of an aspiration than of a description of the power 'L Qais possessed, given its monumental nature. The debate on the precise rendering of his royal title may lead to different routes of interpretation, but both point towards the same direction of travel. What seems to be the strikingly ethnic claim to be 'King of (all) the Arabs' gives the sense that it was becoming possible to speak in broad social terms, rather than in the more restrictive vocabulary of the tribe. The claim to hold sway over a large geographic area may fail to relate to social identity in the same way, but it still suggests that the ambitions of Arabian rulers were becoming ever more expansive.

The strength of these nascent, but nevertheless remarkable, developments in the fourth century should not, however, be overplayed. The inscription was written in an admittedly heavily Arabised dialect of Nabataean, thereby retaining the ancestral script of power, and attesting to the still limited nature of cultural development and self-consciousness over the people 'L Qais appears to have dominated. The still relatively insignificant nature of Arabian groups in this period is also glimpsed in the pages of Ammianus Marcellinus. During the Emperor Julian's invasion of Persia in 363, he recruits a number of Saracen auxiliaries whose leaders are presented as abjectly

submissive, and whose deeds receive little mention in the story of the campaign (*History*, 23.3.8).

The Ghassān in the Age of Justinian

By the beginning of the reign of Justinian in 527, however, the process of socio-political development that it is possible to glimpse from the second century—the growth of larger groups, more powerful leaders, and a deeper sense of shared identity—was far more advanced. Federate Saracen phylarchs, notably the Jafnid Ghassān, start to head confederations that take on the appearance of a state within a state along and beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire.³² They govern themselves in more sophisticated ways, occasionally act beyond the express wishes of Constantinople, and openly patronise the Miaphysite church rather than adhering to the Chalcedonian creed of the emperors.

The new significance of Roman Arabian clients in the sixth century immediately becomes apparent in the clear evidence for their greater prominence on the field of battle. Even though federate forces may not have replaced the dominance of the regular armies of both Rome and Persia in their various intermittent wars, the Arabian clients of both sides nonetheless appear to be far more central to great power warfare than in previous centuries. There is indeed good reason to consider that they were more than the ‘irritant’ that they have occasionally been called by modern scholars, who must always be aware that recycling ethnographic stereotypes of ancient Arabians—or of any other ‘barbarians’—from the classical sources into a rational presentation of history must take full account of the literary tradition within which their sources were writing.³³

Procopius, for example, even despite his occasional classicising distain for Saracens as a barbarian people, nevertheless reveals the military significance of the Arabian clients of both Rome and Persia. His description of the Persian client king al-Munḍir is instructive, despite the clear rhetorical exaggeration of the wounds he inflicted on Rome.

*Alamoundaras was most discreet and well experienced in matters of warfare, thoroughly faithful to the Persians, and unusually energetic—a man who for a space of fifty years forced the Roman state to bend the knee. For beginning from the boundaries of Egypt and as far as Mesopotamia he plundered the whole country, pillaging one place after another, burning the buildings in his track and making captives of the population by the tens of thousands on each raid, most of whom he killed without consideration, while he gave up the others for great sums of money. (Procopius, Wars, I.17.40-41)*³⁴

Clear though this passage is, one could conceivably suggest that it owes something to *Kaiserkritik*, due to Procopius' emphasis on the defeat men, elsewhere dismissed as barbarians, inflicted on his bête-noire Justinian.³⁵ There is good reason, however, to argue that this should not be overplayed. One can imagine that Procopius' writings had to be largely credible to be taken seriously and had therefore to resonate with the world as it was. He could also surely not have attempted credibly to exculpate his patron Belisarius, commander of the Roman army at its defeat at Callinicum in 531, by blaming the disaster on the cowardly behaviour of the Ghassān (*Wars*, I.18.36–37), if Rome's Arabian clients played an unimportant role on the battlefield.

One event above all—itsself not unconnected to military exigencies—that took place two years before Callinicum indicates the growing dependency of Rome on her federates as well as demonstrating the kind of ways in which imperial patronage could consolidate a client's regional power and status. The Jafnid phylarch al-Ḥārith (Arethas), after playing a perhaps pivotal role in suppressing a Samaritan revolt, was given power over all of the Saracens in the 'Arabias' (Ἀραβίαις) the plural in the Greek text presumably referring to the frontier provinces—and the 'dignity of King' (ἀξίωμα βασιλέως) (Procopius, *Wars*, I.17.47). Procopius notes that this was unprecedented on the Arabian frontier—common though investing client kings was as a tool of Roman diplomacy elsewhere—and that it was motivated by a desire to create a foil to the threat of the Persian-allied Lakhm.

Procopius did not use the description 'dignity of King' lightly.³⁶ It is clear from comparative cases from the Roman client-states of the Caucasus that investing a client leader with royal dignity involved a significant material and ideological investment, designed not only to bind the ruler to Constantinople, but also to consolidate and extend his local power. The example of the Emperor Justin's grant of kingship to Ztathios, the ruler of the Laz, is instructive. He was grandly received in Constantinople, received magnificent gifts—useful for distributing to his supporters back home—beautiful raiment and even a Roman wife (John Malalas, *Chronicle*, 17.9).³⁷

The local impact of al-Ḥārith's receipt of the 'dignity of King' is evident in a fascinating graffito found in 1962 about one hundred kilometres southeast of Damascus in Jabal Usays. These four lines of skeletal Arabic cast an important light on the proto-state nature of the Ghassān. They are worth quoting in full.

*Ibrāhīm ibn Mughīra al-Awsī arsalanī al-Ḥārith al-malik 'alā
Sulaymān msylḥt/h sanat 423*

'Arethas the King sent me, Ibrāhīm bin Mughīra al-Awsī, to

fort Sulayman in the year 423 (528 A.D.)'. (Transcription taken from Shahīd , *Sixth Century*, 118)

The Usays graffito provides several important insights on the Ghassānid polity.³⁸ First, its location outside the Roman Province of Arabia and in the Province of Phoenicia Libanensis suggests that Procopius' report of Arethas being made *archphylarch* was accurate. His power seems to have extended over federate Arabian groups along the length of the frontier south of the Euphrates. Further evidence for this broad-based power is confirmed by the tribal *nisba*, *al-Awsī*, which implies that the Ibrāhīm in question belonged to the Aws tribe of Yathrib in the Ḥijāz . The Ghassān, therefore, could clearly command supra-tribal loyalties. The Jafnids could also evidently administer a sophisticated system of border control—probably involving an element of bureaucracy if a commander like Ibrāhīm was able to write—and were likewise somewhat integrated into the wider life of the settled province, as implied by the use of the local calendar of Bostra for the date.

Perhaps most importantly of all, both the language and the script of the graffito are clearly Arabic. This is evidence not only for linguistic development, but more significantly for the development of a cultural self-consciousness formed in part by, and articulated through, state-like activity.³⁹ In this respect, the Usays graffito, and the profound inferences it provokes, is not unique.

A bilingual lintel from the martyrium of St John found at Harran in Syria , which dates to 568, similarly indicates both the new social significance of the Arabic language and also demonstrates the high degree of the political and social development of Rome's Arabian clients on the frontier.⁴⁰ It records the dedication of the martyrium and dates the building's completion with reference to the 'reign' of the local Arabian phylarch , a clear demonstration of where power was perceived to reside in the locality. The Arabic text, moreover, precedes the Greek: a location that implies the language's greater significance in the mind of the dedicator and also, perhaps, in the minds of the local audience. Further, the well-formed nature of the letters presuppose a broader, longer-term tradition of writing Arabic, perhaps prompted by a desire within the local elite to display their social power and cultural self-confidence as much as it may have been necessary for more prosaic, administrative purposes.⁴¹

One further important observation can be made from a return to the Usays graffito. The name Ibrāhīm is biblical. This attests to what has been seen as a distinguishing feature of the Ghassān: their strident religiosity.⁴² In some respects, this should not be a surprise. The Ghassān were based on the borders of the Holy Land in an age in

which state-sponsored religion was coming to define politics and identity to an unprecedented extent. Peoples in the Roman sphere of influence started naturally to adopt variations on the imperial creed if not the Chalcedonian confession itself. When a Caucasian people, the Tzani, started to serve alongside the Roman army in the mid-sixth century, for example, all of them are reported to have converted to Christianity (Procopius , *Wars*, I.15.25).

The Jafnids were great patrons of the Miaphysite church. Laudatory mosaics and inscriptions at sites like the shrine of St. Sergius at Resāfa attest to the involvement of the Ghassān in church building.⁴³ They were also a pivotal force in the institutional development of the Miaphysite confession relative to Chalcedonian orthodoxy. The famous request of al -Ḥārith for bishops to minister to his people in the early 540s gave the Miaphysite leaders Theodore of Arabia and James Bar'adai a secure base and the political protection of an important federate people. They used this foundation of support to ordain other Miaphysite bishops throughout the East, far beyond their ostensible remit, thereby helping to restore the hierarchy and institutional structures of their persecuted confession.⁴⁴

There is even tentative evidence to suggest that it was possible to conceive of the manifestation of the religiosity of the Ghassān on the battlefield. They appear to have been approached by Miaphysite bishops to fight for God after the massacre of the Christians at Najrān in southern Arabia in the early 520s. A letter attributed to Simeon of Bēth-Arshām, which tells of the massacres in gruesomely inspiring detail, was written from the camp of the Ghassān at al-Jābiya—a coincidence that may well attest to Ghassānid concern for their co-religionists to the south, stretching even to taking revenge.⁴⁵ Militant religiosity was certainly not absent from the Near East, or from Ghassānid experience in the sixth century. Belisarius , for instance, is reported to have invoked divine support and inspiration before the Battle of Callinicum (Procopius , *Wars*, I.18.21–23).

The strikingly autonomous religious policy of the Ghassān—a move that attests to a quasi-independent sense of selfhood—was mirrored on the battlefield and in the diplomatic sphere. As in matters of faith, the Ghassān appear progressively to act independently from their putative Roman patrons. According to Procopius (*Wars*, II.28.12–14), for instance, the Ghassān continued to fight the Lakhm even after Rome and Persia had signed a peace treaty in 545 . Three years later, they sent their own representatives alongside the Roman on a diplomatic mission to the Kingdom of Himyar in the south of the Arabian Peninsula. Given what seems to be the Ghassān's increasing tendency to project themselves as something closer to the equals rather than clients of Rome, it is hard not to sense that they were

aspiring to some form of statehood.

Constantinople may consequently have become conscious of the potential danger posed by her empire's border guards. In circumstances that are not easy to reconstruct, the Emperor Justin II seems to have ordered the assassination of Munḍir, the then Ghassān phylarch, in 570 after he won a startling victory over the Lakhm that encouraged him to request more subsidies, and that could have sparked war between the great powers had Persia interpreted the defeat of their clients as a breach of the Treaty of 561. The plot failed, Munḍir was reconciled to Constantinople, but relations broke down permanently after 582 when he was accused of treason by the then *magister militum* and future Emperor Maurice following a failed campaign against Persia. Munḍir was subsequently exiled with his family to Sicily.⁴⁶ The Ghassān then appear to become a less remarkable presence in the sources as they move into the seventh century.

The Ghassān did not, however, disappear entirely. Bostra was sacked by Munḍir's angry followers after his arrest, and Arabian federates, perhaps still under members of the Jafnid family, were retained as an integral element of frontier security. It is also important to acknowledge that warriors explicitly labelled 'Saracens' were not absent from Heraclius' army during his great war with Persia a generation or more after Munḍir. The *Chronicle* of Theophanes records their presence in the Roman army in Armenia (AM 6113/620/21 AD) and even records that they were sent forward as a crack strike force to intercept the personal retinue of the Persian Shah (AM 6114/621/22).⁴⁷ Such a role on the battlefield implies that Heraclius' Saracens were not unimportant to the war effort. The presence of Saracens in Heraclius' army during the final years of the war is similarly attested in the *Chronicon Paschale* (s.a. 628).⁴⁸

Yet the apparently rapid and easy taming of Ghassānid ambitions suggests that the extent of the Ghassān's political self-consciousness and state-like aspirations should not be exaggerated. Roman relationships with client kings were, to a considerable extent, highly personal affairs, and it is hardly inconceivable to imagine that the removal of the leader of a federate force could unleash internal tensions and competition for imperial patronage, thereby damaging the group's cohesiveness and power. This may well have been the case with the Ghassān after the removal of Munḍir, who seems to have incited the ire of a particularly influential regular Roman officer in the person of Maurice. It may also be important that, even though the Jafnids behaved in many ways like a provincial Roman elite by indulging in activities like endowing churches, they remained barbarians from Arabia as well as Miaphysites: facts well able to stir

deeply rooted Roman and Chalcedonian prejudices.⁴⁹

The socio-political impact of Roman clientage on the people of north Arabia, however, was profound, regardless of the loss of prestige suffered by the Jafnids. Its significance is even apparent in the later Islamic sources, many of which wax eloquent on the heroism of the Ghassān and the Lakhm and the opulence of the ruling dynasties' courts.⁵⁰ Centuries of acculturation had, in many important respects, made Classical prejudices against un-civilised, so-called barbarian peoples seem anachronistic by the dawn of the seventh century. The Arabian world, on the eve of Islam, had developed practices of supra-tribal political loyalties, strong rulers, and even a passionate religiosity that would have been impossible without the influence of Rome and, indeed, of Persia.

Arabian groups, furthermore, as evidenced by the activity of the Ghassān, appear to have possessed some kind of broad-based social, even an ethnic consciousness, to have been able to act politically independent of their imperial patrons, and were ready even to act against stated imperial policy. Even a minimalist reading of the evidence for Arabian development would have to accept that the imperial federates were a force to be reckoned with, and that their dependence on, and loyalty to, the empire was not a foregone conclusion.⁵¹

The Failure of the Roman Frontier After the Last Great War of Antiquity

War, a catalyst strong enough to force the redirection of loyalties and to promote new powers at the expense of exhausted great empires, was certainly not lacking in the early seventh century. The year 603 saw the outbreak of what has been evocatively dubbed the 'Last Great War of Antiquity', a twenty-five year conflict that convulsed the Near East from the Caucasian mountains to the plains of Egypt.⁵² Years of hard fighting saw the Roman Near East collapse, Constantinople besieged, and the very survival of Europe's greatest empire cast into doubt. The Emperor Heraclius, in a desperate do-or-die campaign, nevertheless managed to reverse the situation completely by an audacious counter-offensive through the Caucasus that threatened the heartland of the Sasanian Empire. The defeat of local Persian forces in the field—due not least to Rome's Turkish allies, who probably comprised the majority of the 'Roman' army—precipitated the implosion of the regime of the Persian ruler Khusrau Abarvez early in 628. Peace soon followed, as did the restoration of Rome's lost provinces. The restoration was, needless to say, a very brief calm before another major storm.⁵³

It is not surprising, therefore, that causal connections between the Last Great War of Antiquity and the outbreak of the seventh century conquests have been deduced and, to varying degrees and for different reasons, been accepted.⁵⁴ It is plausible to imagine that the progress of any army invading from Arabia faced imperial forces far smaller, and perhaps less able to resist, than would have been the case without the last Romano-Persian war. A generation, moreover, would have come to maturity in the former Roman provinces with no direct experience of central Roman rule and an uncertain appetite for it. Local elites may well have drifted away from an empire that recent experience had taught them was not a secure guarantor of stability, as was the case during the crisis years of the third century and in the Roman West in the fifth century. Doctrinal divisions have also been cited as reasons explaining the potential, even likely, disloyalty of the provincials to the re-imposition of a proudly Chalcedonian regime.⁵⁵

The significance of the last Romano-Persian war, however, has recently been under-played by a tendency to emphasise the allegedly unprecedented and all-consuming religious zeal of invading armies raised exclusively from inner Arabia.⁵⁶ Even the Islamic sources, however, offer enough examples of the invading army growing on the march to suggest that 'Islam' and the inner desert were not the whole story, as was demonstrated in Chap. 5. There is one further element of the impact of the war that also deserves investigation: the attitude of Roman Arabian clients to the invading armies in the early 630s.

The two chief Byzantine sources for the seventh century, the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor and the *Short History* of the Patriarch Nicephorus, contain a striking concordance in what they record to have happened with respect to Rome's Arabian clients on the frontier. The events they describe are strikingly plausible, and resonate suggestively with the kind of phenomena often attested across the centuries of Roman-federate relations from the Rhine to the River Jordan. Both Nicephorus and Theophanes record a dramatic breakdown in relations between the Roman authorities and their Arabian clients. The events recorded are worth quoting at length.

Now some of the neighbouring Arabs were receiving small payments from the emperors for guarding the approaches to the desert (πρὸς τὸ φυλάξαι τὰ στόμια τῆς ἐρήμου). At that time, a certain eunuch arrived to distribute the wages of the soldiers, and when the Arabs came to receive their wages according to custom, the eunuch drove them away, saying, "The emperor can barely pay his soldiers their wages, much less these dogs (τοῖς κυσὶ τοῦτοις)!" Distressed, therefore, the Arabs went over to their fellow tribesmen (ἀπῆλθον πρὸς τοὺς ὁμοφύλους), and they led them (their 'fellow

tribesmen') to the rich country of Gaza (καὶ αὐτοὶ ὠδήγησαν αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τὴν χώραν Γάζης), which is the gateway to the desert in the direction of Mount Sinai. (*Chronicle*, A.M. 6123/630/31 A.D.)

Nicephorus bears witness to a very similar situation.

For Sergius kata Niketan met his end in the following way. The Saracens, after flaying a camel, shut him up in its hide and sewed it up... The charge against him was that he had encouraged Heraclius not to permit the Saracens to engage in commerce from the Roman land and send out of the Roman state the 30 lbs. of gold which they normally achieved through trade; and for this reason they began to cause ruin to the Roman land (ἐντεῦθεν τε αὐτοὺς ἄρξαι τῇ Ῥωμαίων λυμαίνεσθαι χώρα). (*Short History*, 20)⁵⁷

Both sources are admittedly as late as some of the sources of the Islamic tradition . Theophanes probably composed his work at some point late in the eighth or in the early ninth century and Nicephorus wrote maybe slightly earlier in the last half of the eighth century.⁵⁸ There is good reason, however, to place more faith in these two texts than one would be advised automatically to trust the sources of the Islamic tradition .

The *Chronicle* of Theophanes is a boldly ambitious work of history that covers events within and beyond the borders of Rome from the reign of Diocletian to the early ninth century. Theophanes' scope, as well as the remarkable lack of stylistic uniformity in his language, demonstrates that the *Chronicle* is far more than the product of one man or a single source and should 'best be viewed as a file of extracts borrowed from earlier sources'.⁵⁹ Study of Theophanes , therefore, is essentially the study of the menagerie of earlier written material that was collated, edited, paraphrased or even simply transcribed into a single document.⁶⁰ It is accordingly likely that earlier, more intrinsically reliable accounts are readily discoverable within the *Chronicle*, preserved in a written medium far more stable and far less open to the kind of presentist revision to which the Arabic oral accounts were prone.

Theophanes gives a clear indication concerning from whom he received such a collection of earlier material. The *Chronicle's* preface reveals that Theophanes' project of writing a history was not the result of his own invention and intellectual drive, but a commission bequeathed to him by a friend, George , the *synkellos* of Tarasios, Patriarch of Constantinople. George had already completed a chronicle that stretched from the Creation to Diocletian and is reported to have also gathered material to continue the chronicle to his own age.⁶¹ He however died before he could do so, leaving the

task to Theophanes, to whom he left not only his completed work, but also the materials (ἄφορμὰς) for its continuation. Theophanes may admit to consulting material beyond what he received from George , but the thoroughness with which George pursued his intellectual endeavour—evident in the half of his chronicle that bears his name—and Theophanes' reported, as well as admitted, lack of advanced learning, implies that most of 'The " *Chronicle* of Theophanes" is in fact a lightly-touched final version of George's work'.⁶²

George , importantly, had spent a considerable amount of time working and living in Palestine . He was probably based at the Old Lavra of St. Chariton near Tekoa, under twenty kilometres south of Jerusalem .⁶³ It is therefore unsurprising that eastern sources are thought to have made a great contribution to his work and consequently to Theophanes' *Chronicle* , not least the lost annalistic history attributed to Theophilus of Edessa . This history, indeed, is generally thought to underpin most of what Theophanes preserves for the years 630 to the mid-eighth century, something that explains the detail that the *Chronicle* offers for eastern affairs.⁶⁴ Other later historians as well as Theophanes also relied on Theophilus, a progeny that allows an essence of the original to be reconstructed. Interestingly, Theophanes' account of the defection of Rome's Arabian clients is not to be found in Theophilus' other dependents.⁶⁵ It is a unique nugget of information descended from at least one other source.

It is, of course, impossible definitely to identify from where this report originated. Various vague attributions are possible.⁶⁶ It is both tempting and plausible, however, to suggest that the account of the defection of the Arabian federates accurately preserves an essentially eyewitness report contemporary to the events it describes. This, it is significant to recognise, would make the account verifiable in a way, and to a degree, impossible for the *akhbar* of the Islamic historical tradition.

First, as has already been noted, the report is inherently plausible. Compensating for the end of Roman subsidies by raiding was common federate practice on all of Rome's frontiers in Late Antiquity . Secondly, the preface of George's *Chronography* reveals a particular interest in capturing the history of Islam, noticeable and perhaps unusual in a Byzantine churchman. He closes his statement of intent for the *Chronography* by announcing, 'I shall describe, as far as I am able, the covenant abominable to Christ and our people, that which the tents of the Idumaeans and the Ishmaelites brought forth' (τὴν κατὰ Χριστοῦ καὶ τοῦ γένους ἡμῶν θεοβδελυκτον διαθήκην, ἣν διέθετο τὰ σκηνώματα τῶν Ἰδουμαίων καὶ οἱ Ἰσμηλιταί... διαγράψω κατὰ δύναμιν). One can imagine, therefore, that George

would have been keen to unearth and transmit any fascinating little local tale that could be connected to the ascent of Islamic power that he could find. Thirdly, he lived in what may have been a perfect location for discovering such accounts: a monastery in southern Palestine whose seventh-century brethren would have experienced the conquests at first hand. It is hardly impossible, therefore, that the report of the defection of Roman federates in Theophanes' *Chronicle* is taken from an eyewitness monastic account dating to the 630s.⁶⁷

It is also probable that a seventh-century source contemporary to the events described likewise hides beneath the surface of Nicephorus' late eighth-century text.⁶⁸ In some respects, the *Short History* is an odd document. It appears to be unfinished and falls into two seemingly self-contained sections, offering a continuous narrative beginning with a summary of the usurpation of Phocas in 602 and his subsequent rule, then entirely omitting the reign of Emperor Constans II (641–668)—the circumstances of his death get a brief mention (*Short History*, 33)—only finally to give another century of narrative, closing with the marriage of Emperor Leo IV to Eirene of Athens in 769. The peculiar nature of the *Short History* perhaps explains this disjointed structure. The high calibre of the Greek, combined with a generally profane concentration on the high politics of state, demonstrate that Nicephorus was writing a self-consciously classicising history. It was perhaps intended as a continuation of the work of the early seventh-century writer Theophylact Simocatta.⁶⁹

The literary, rather than solely historical, imperatives that drove the composition of the text, combined with the fact of the two neat sections, imply that Nicephorus did little more than artistically paraphrase two earlier vulgar Greek sources into a higher style.⁷⁰ Considering that the first section ends in 641, and the fact that, from the immediate aftermath of the fall of Phocas in 610 (*Short History*, 2), events move along in chronological progression, the suggestion that the source of the first section is some kind of 'Constantinopolitan chronicle' covering most of the first half of the seventh century, has received general acceptance.⁷¹ Nicephorus makes no citation or even allusion to the potential nature of this source—so as to maintain a pretence of the Classical ideal of autopsy—but its apparent thirty-year span does not make a single hand covering events in a single author's lifetime unlikely. It is, therefore, quite reasonable to suggest that the dramatic account of the death of Sergius *kata Niketan*, and the ensuing federate attacks, were written down within months of taking place, having reached Constantinople as a macabre and fascinating eyewitness account of the deteriorating situation in the East that the chronicle's author could not ignore.

This implication is significant beyond the actual proximity to

seventh-century events that it would suggest of Nicephorus' later text. Principally, it offers further proof for the mutual independence of the source traditions behind Theophanes' and Nicephorus' histories.⁷² This consequently suggests that the collapse of relations between Rome and her Arabian clients in the aftermath of the last great war with Persia was a serious, even widespread phenomenon, as two different versions of essentially the same kind of event reached two separate authors independently. The breakdown of Rome's network of federate alliances on the Palestinian marches must indeed have been perceived as important at the time, as word of it crossed the seas to reach Nicephorus' chronicler in Constantinople.

What the accounts of both authors suggest, therefore, is that the Arabian frontier was in crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the last Romano-Persian war, Rome seems to have found herself no longer able to offer the kind of incentives to frontier groups to serve the empire, to which they had become accustomed over previous generations. State coffers were empty. Theophanes even records how Heraclius was forced to confiscate the funds of religious institutions and to melt-down church plate to fund the war effort (*Chronicle*, AM 6113/620//21 AD). Such an indication that the situation had become so severe that the empire had been forced to convert its precious metal reserves to liquid capital is confirmed by the more contemporary *Chronicon Paschale* (s.a. 615). Already, by the second decade of the war, the weight of the coinage was reduced, and imperial salaries were slashed by half. The likelihood that the authorities in the newly reoccupied *Oriens* were short, not just of coin, but also of precious metal, would appear to be confirmed by the remarkably precise reference given to bullion by Nicephorus.

This would appear to be the proximate reason why the Arabian federates recorded by Theophanes and Nicephorus start to raid the frontier lands and defect to 'their fellow tribesmen.' The suggestion that these tribesmen were in fact the followers of Muḥammad is the natural assumption to make. This supposition has certainly received acceptance. Mark Whittow, for instance, follows this line of analysis and cites Theophanes' version of events as an intriguing coda to the end of Roman power in the Near East. He does not, however, explore any possible deeper or further ramifications.⁷³

Modern orientalists, moreover, appear conventionally to have been resistant to giving detailed consideration to the Byzantine sources. Kennedy cites neither Theophanes nor Nicephorus in his narrative of the conquest of Palestine. Donner, intriguingly, fails to note the defection of federates as attested in Theophanes, even though he refers to the exact same passage as evidence for the end of Roman subsidies being given to border tribes.⁷⁴ This striking refusal to

consider the hard evidence of what can be shown to be good sources hints at the kind of pre-conceived notions—that the invaders were indeed all committed Muslims who issued out of the Ḥijāz , inspired by the preaching of the prophet—that have dominated reconstructions of the seventh-century conquests.

There is indeed good reason to believe that the defection of Roman federates was significant. One only has to look a little earlier in the passage of Theophanes to understand why. Before announcing the defection of the federate Arabians to the invaders, Theophanes talks of the comprehensive earlier defeat of a hostile invading force at a village he calls Mouthous . This is clearly a reference to what the Islamic tradition knows as the Battle of Mu'ta , which took place towards the end of 629, and which is recorded as a crushing defeat for the *'ummah* (al-Ṭabarī , *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1610–1619).

It is striking, therefore, that the invaders appear to break through the Roman frontier and go on to conquer the Roman Near East *only after* the defection of Roman federates. In Theophanes, the year after the federate defection sees the invading army raid southern Palestine at will and defeat a Roman force in the field outside Caesarea (AM 6124/631/32). The next year witnesses the fall of Bostra , among other cities, and the defeat of a further Roman army under the emperor's brother, Theodore (AM 6125/632/33). Theophanes' *Chronicle* may suggest that imperial resistance was not entirely futile: the entry that records the defeat of the emperor's brother also notes the subsequent defeat of an invading Arabian force (who interestingly flee towards the Damascus area rather than away from the Roman provinces). The invaders, however, are able to press on, do not experience a reversal as considerable as Mu'ta again, and, by 635, are attested as controlling broad swathes of Egypt , Palestine and Syria (AM 6127/634/35). The *Short History* implies the same basic outline of events, and, like Theophanes, records that Heraclius left the region for Constantinople soon after the invaders' power came to be felt from Alexandria to Damascus (23–24).

It cannot be denied that the Islamic tradition offers another explanation for initial Muslim failure at Mu'ta being followed by years of victory. The Meccans are said to have become reconciled to the prophet in the following year, 630, an event that precipitated the so-called year of deputations in 631, when tribes from across Arabia came to acknowledge Muḥammad's sovereignty and converted *en masse* to Islam (*The Life of the Messenger of God*, 933).⁷⁵ The wars of the *Riddah* are also said to have come to an end by 634, ostensibly uniting the far-flung lands of the Arabian Peninsula, thereby giving the successors of the prophet in Medina a far larger reserve of manpower than was enjoyed in the days of Muḥammad .

Yet it is perhaps wise to exercise a significant degree of scepticism towards the analytical angle suggested by the Islamic tradition. First, it has never been proven that the deserts of Arabia could have furnished the forces necessary, however small they conceivably could have been, for the conquest of entire provinces. There is indeed a striking lack of study on the peninsula's ancient demographics. Secondly, the notion of Arabian unity as presented in the Islamic historical tradition depends upon mass conversion to Islam as a divinely ordained, fully developed doctrine, a concept that is increasingly recognised as fictitious, as has earlier been noted. Paleo-Islam was not yet the 'whole faith' the tradition needs it to have been to have had such a ground-breaking impact.⁷⁶

There are, conversely, good reasons to emphasise the likely significance of Roman Arabian federates to the success of the early conquests. The groups that constituted Rome's clients, as has been demonstrated, had become a significant force in the region. They would not only have been militarily experienced, but they would also have been relatively numerically significant compared to regular imperial forces in the region, owing to their historical role as the central prop of frontier security. Further, they would have been deeply familiar with the land they were invading. Theophanes, after all, explicitly states that it was they who had the ability to lead their 'fellow tribesmen' into southern Palestine. Defecting federates may also have been better able to achieve the acquiescence of provincials to an invading force, owing to potential prior familiarity. It is hardly inconceivable, therefore, that it was Rome's erstwhile clients who accounted for a significant proportion of her conquerors.

This reconstruction of events provokes a further, final question. Were there reasons other than the failure of the empire to meet its financial obligations that encouraged federate Arabians to defect to men riding out of the Ḥijāz? The Jabal Usays inscription, as has already been seen, implies that there were close relations between the Ghassān and the tribes of the Ḥijāz a century previous to the rule of the prophet in Yathrib. As has been traced in the epigraphy of northern Arabia, such cross-tribal co-operation seems to have been underpinned by some sense of shared identity that had developed along the imperial frontier, catalysed by the action of the great powers, expressed in the confidence to use the native language. It is consequently likely that the personnel of the armies invading the provinces were little different in ethnic, human terms, from many of the men in imperial service, as was implicit in the anecdote of Rustam's spy.

Islam, moreover, as it emerges from the Qur'ān —the only textual source from the Islamic tradition that dates to the seventh century—

seems to have made an appeal to this sense of identity through raising the language spoken by the North Arabian tribes to the means of divine revelation. God had, after all, given to Muḥammad , ‘an Arabic Qur’ān , so that you may understand’ (*Sūrat al-Yūsuf*, 12.2), a passage that resonates with possibility given the growing self-confidence of the Arabian peoples to use their language to express themselves and their local power. It is not beyond the possible, therefore, that the message of Muḥammad , however it was preached during his lifetime and in the years immediately after his death, had the potential to speak to the slow but steadily growing self-awareness of the north Arabian peoples, evident over the previous several centuries. The ‘scripture, in which there is no doubt’ (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2.2) may consequently have appealed to a nascent ethnic, as well as to a religious, consciousness.

This notion has deep implications. By catalysing the development of a stronger sense of shared identity among their Arabian clients through sponsoring ever more powerful leaders, able to command larger tribal confederations, which could assert themselves ever more self-confidently, it is hard not to conclude that Rome and Persia had more than a hand in their own destruction.

Footnotes

1

M.J. de Goeje, ed., *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari* Vol. 4 (Brill, 1879–1901).

2

L. Mendelssohn, ed., *Zosimi Comitis et Exadvocati Fisci Historia Nova* (Leipzig, 1887).

3

F. Curta, ‘Introduction’, in *Borders, Barriers, and Ethnogenesis in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, F. Curta, ed., (Brepols Publishers n.v.: Turnhout, 2005) 2–9 gives a useful summary of the nature of the development of frontier studies since the 1980s.

4

C. Whittaker , *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore & London, 1994) 192–193.

5

Ibid., 69. See *ibid.* 1–30 for the modern re-imagining of the Roman border and ancient ideological conceptions of space and barriers.

6

Ibid., 130.

7

P. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford, 1988) vi.

8

I. Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs* (Dumbarton Oaks: Washington D.C, c.1984–2009). Shahīd's lengthy series includes a prequel dealing with Roman and Arab relations before the fourth century, and separate volumes on the fourth and fifth centuries. The volume on the sixth century has a sub-volume, which is itself divided into two parts.

9

G. Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011).

10

The most important study of the Roman frontier in the East remains B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford, 1992). Isaac decisively undermined the notion of a heavily fortified frontier (118–134) and replaced it with one that demonstrated Rome's use of Arabian clients from quite an early age to maintain border stability (235–249).

11

H. MacAdam, 'Review Article: *Imperium in imperio*: The Ghassānid Presence within Byzantine *Oriens* on the Eve of Islam', in *Al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003) 187–207; 207 for comments on the need for a full history of the Lakhm.

12

R. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (Routledge: London & New York, 2001) 3. Hoyland synthesises a vast degree of information to paint a valuable, still contemporary and diachronic picture of Arabia from prehistory to the dawn of Islam.

13

N. Lewis, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan: 1800–1980* (Cambridge, 1987) 1.

- 14
Ibid., 2–5.
- 15
G. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Harvard, 1983) 9–10.
- 16
Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 7–8.
- 17
Ibid, 13–228 captures the nature and extent of this diversity over time and throughout the Arabian world.
- 18
Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 115.
- 19
W. Seyfarth, ed., *Ammiani Marcellini rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt* (Leipzig, 1978).
- 20
D. Graf, ‘The Saracens and the Defence of the Arabian Frontier’, in D. Graf, ed., *Rome and the Arabian Frontier: from the Nabataeans to the Severans* (Ashgate, 1997) 1–26. The various etymologies are summarised on 14.
- 21
The most up-to-date, if not now definitive, transcription and translation of the Ruwwāfa inscriptions is to be found in M.C.A. Macdonald with contributions from A. Corcella, T. Daryaee, G. Fisher, M. Gibbs, A. Lewin, D. Violante and C. Whately, ‘Arabs and Empires before the Sixth Century’, in G. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford, 2015) 11–89, esp. 44–56. This replaces other transcriptions, like that of G. Bowersock, ‘The Greek-Nabataean Bilingual Inscription at Ruwwāfa, Saudi Arabia’, in J. Bingen, G. Cambier, and G. Nachtergaele, eds., *Le Monde Grec: pensée, littérature, histoire, documents – Hommages à Claire Préaux* (Bruxelles, 1975) 513–522. Another useful work by Macdonald that discusses the Ruwwāfa inscriptions together with one of the etymologies for ‘Saracen’ discussed here, can be found in M.C.A. Macdonald, ‘On Saracens, the Rawwāfah Inscription and the Roman Army’, in M.C.A. Macdonald, ed., *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia* (Ashgate, 2009) 1–26.
- 22
Macdonald, ‘Arabs and Empires before the Sixth Century’, 45.

23

This is the translation preferred by Graf, 'The Saracens', as well as by others.

24

Ibid., 15.

25

Macdonald, 'On Saracens,' 6–7.

26

Ibid., 4–5. Macdonald admits that this etymology is speculative, as it must be admitted all others also are, but he advances a highly convincing and detailed linguistic case.

27

Macdonald, 'Arabs and Empires before the Sixth Century', 50–51.

28

A recognition of the value of epigraphy for understanding the socio-political development of frontier Arabian groups seems to underpin much of the recent work of Robert Hoyland on the subject, as in R. Hoyland, 'Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity', in P. Sijpesteijn, L. Sundelin, S. Tovar, and A. Zomeño, eds., *From al-Andalus to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Muslim World* (Brill: Leiden, 2007) 219–242.

29

See I. Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century: Volume 1 Part 1* (Dumbarton Oaks: Washington D.C., 1995) 117 for the more conventional translation of 'King of all the 'Arabs' and Z. Fiema, A. al-Jallal, M.C.A. Macdonald and L. Nehmé, 'Provincia Arabia: Nabataea, the Emergence of Arabic as a Written Language, and Graeco-Arabica', in G. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, 373–433, esp. 405–409 for the suggestion of 'king of all 'Arab.'

30

I. Shahīd, *Sixth Century*, 117.

31

Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 138–147.

- 32 The relative suitability of the terms 'Jafnid' or 'Ghassān' to describe Rome's Arabian clients is debated. Fisher, *Between Empires*, 3–7 emphasises the nature of Roman/federate relations as predominantly elite and individual affairs. Group terminology, however, should not be discarded completely, as elite power rested ultimately on control of a larger group whose own thoughts and actions should not be written out of history.
- 33 M. Whitby, 'Greek Historical Writing after Procopius: Variety and Vitality', in A. Cameron and L. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East I: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, 1992) 25–80; 78 for the description of the Arabian federate forces as mere 'irritants'. Whitby appears at least in part to base his assessment on the comments of Classical authors that label Arabian groups 'fickle' or 'untrustworthy', anti-barbarian stereotypes rooted in the Classical literary tradition.
- 34 H. Dewing, ed. and trans., *Procopius: History of the Wars in Six Volumes* (London & New York, 1914).
- 35 Shahīd, *Sixth Century*, 52–55 gives a succinct explanation for this theme, which he often unearths in Procopius.
- 36 Ibid., 95–124.
- 37 H. Thurn, ed., *Ioannis Malalae Chronographia* (Berlin, 2000).
- 38 The following interpretation of the graffito is largely dependent on Shahīd, *Sixth Century*, 117–124.
- 39 Hoyland, 'Arab Kings', 394–396 for such an assessment.
- 40 The Arabic text is reproduced and analysed by P. Schröder, 'Epigraphisches aus Syrien', in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 38 (1884) 530–534.

41

R. Hoyland , 'Late Roman *Provincia Arabia*, Monophysite Monks and Arab Tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery', *Semitica et Classica* 2 (2009) 117–139; 131–133 for the importance of the Harran inscription.

42

Shahīd , for example, has placed great emphasis on the religiosity of the Ghassān, not least by devoting a whole volume to the subject: Shahīd , *Sixth Century*, I.2 ('Ecclesiastical History').

43

G. Fisher, 'The Political Development of the Ghassān between Rome and Iran', in *Journal of Late Antiquity*, Volume 1, No. 2 (2008) 311–334; 320–321. See also Hoyland , 'Late Roman *Provincia Arabia*', 118–120 for Ghassānid church building.

44

W. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1972) 284–295.

45

I. Shahīd , *The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents* (Société des Bollandistes: Bruxelles, 1971) for the published text.

46

Fisher, *Between Empires*, 173–184 offers a judicious assessment of the evidence for the fall of Muṣṭafīr.

47

J. Classen, ed., *Theophanis Chronographia* (Bonn, 1839–1841).

48

L. Dindorf, ed., *Chronicon Paschale* (Bonn, 1823).

49

Contemporary examples of anti-'barbarian' Roman prejudice are present in Theophylact Simocatta , for example, *History*, III.17.7 (C. de Boor, ed., *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae*, (Leipzig, 1887)). Mark Whittow interestingly offers a novel explanation for the animosity of the Roman elite towards the leaders of the Ghassān in this period. He suggests

that the Jafnids were effectively in competition with the Roman aristocracy for control over marginal agricultural land, which, in an age now thought to have been marked by economic expansion across the Roman East, presented a good return on investment. See M. Whittow , ‘Rethinking the Jafnids: New Approaches to Rome’s Arab Allies’ in D. Genequand and C. J. Robin, eds., *Les Jafnides: des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VI^e siècle de l’ère chrétienne), actes du colloque de Paris, 24–25 novembre 2008* (Éditions de Boccard: Paris, 2015) 11–36, esp. 25–27.

50

H. Munt, with contributions from T. Daryaei, O. Edaibat, R. Hoyland , and I. Toral-Niehoff, ‘Arabic and Persian sources for Pre-Islamic Arabia’, in G. Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, 434–500; see for example 471–472.

51

Whittow , who counsels caution on over-assessing the extent of the importance of the Ghassān in the late sixth century, for example, has nonetheless acknowledged that ‘the genie could not be put back in the bottle. The inhabitants of the empire’s desert periphery were richer, more organised and much more militarily effective than they had been three hundred years earlier’ in M. Whittow , ‘The Late Roman/Early Byzantine Near East’, in C. Robinson, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I – The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries* (Cambridge, 2010) 72–97; 93 for the quote.

52

J. Howard-Johnston, ‘Al-Tabari on the Last Great War of Antiquity’, in J. Howard - Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historiographical and Historical Studies* (Aldershot, 2006) 1–22, coins the term.

53

Detailed summaries of the Last Great War of Antiquity can be found first and foremost in J. Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010) 437–445—where he distils much of the insights of previous pages into narrative form—and in P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500–700* (Oxford, 2011) 226–249.

54

Whittow
, ‘The Late Roman/Early Byzantine Near East’, 73.

55

One of the more strident examples of this interpretation can be found in J. Fiey, ‘The last Byzantine campaign into Persia and its influence on the attitude of the local populations to the Muslim conquerors, 7-16 AH/628–636 AD,’ in M. Bakht, ed., *Proceedings on the Second Symposium on the History of Bilād al-Shām During the Early Islamic Period Up to 40 A.H./640 A.D.: The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilād al-Shām*

56

Sarris, as well as Howard-Johnston, has demonstrated a tendency to prioritise ‘zeal’ over the ramifications of the Romano-Persian war; see Sarris, *Empires of Faith*, 274.

57

C. Mango, ed. and trans., *Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople Short History* (Dumbarton Oaks: Washington D.C., 1990).

58

For Theophanes, see primarily C. Mango and R. Scott, ed. and trans., *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History A.D. 284–813* (Oxford, 1997) xliii–lxiii; for Nicephorus, Mango, *Nikephoros*, 1–2; 8–12.

59

Mango and Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*, lxxiv.

60

Mango and Scott present a list of twenty potential underlying sources, which they describe as ‘neither exhaustive nor certain’ in *ibid.*, lxxiv–lxxxviii.

61

A. Mosshammer, ed., *Georgii Syncelli Ecloga Chronographica* (Leipzig, 1984).

62

Theodore the Studite’s panegyric on Theophanes, for instance, records that he was ‘unacquainted with deep wisdom’ (ἄπειρος ὢν τῆς μωρανθείσης σοφίας). S. Efthymiadis, ‘Le panégyrique de S. Théophane Le Confesseur par S. Théodore Stoudite (BHG 1729b): Edition critique du texte intégral’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 111 (1993) 259–290.

63

For a reconstruction of George’s life, see W. Adler and P. Tuffin, ed. and trans., *The Chronography of George Synkellos: A Byzantine Chronicle of Universal History from the Creation* (Oxford, 2002) xxix–lxxxviii.

64

R. Hoyland ed. and trans., *Theophilus of Edessa’s Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* (Liverpool, 2011) 10, suggests that

Theophanes is dependent on a version of Theophilus to c.740. Mango and Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*, extend this dependency to c.780.

65

Hoyland, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle*, 90–94, for a comparison of material descended from Theophilus treating the early conquests in Palestine.

66

Hoyland, for example, sees two separate 'Greek reports'—one on the defection, one on the Battle of Mu'ta—and an Arabic account lying behind the year's entry (ibid, 92). He does not speculate from where the 'Greek reports' may have come.

67

L. Petersen, *Siege Warfare and Military Organisation in the Successor States (400–800 AD): Byzantium, the West and Islam* (Brill: Leiden, 2013) 430 seems also to have come essentially to the same conclusion – 'probably dates back to a near-contemporary account'—without explaining why or how.

68

Mango, *Nikephoros*, 8–12, settles on the 780s as the likely period of the text's composition based upon internal criticism and knowledge of Nicephorus' career.

69

Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses*, 242; 237–263 for a broader analysis.

70

It should, however, be noted that Mango, *Nikephoros*, 12–13, argues that the first paragraph of the first section descends from a third source, John of Antioch.

71

Ibid, 14. Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses*, 248, for agreement.

72

Mango, *Nikephoros*, 12, notes that there seems to have been no contact between the work of both authors, even though they were contemporaries of one another, and suggests that this may be because of the iconodule colouring of both texts, which would have advised their authors and later possessors against circulation until 843.

73

Whittow , ‘The Late Roman/Early Byzantine Near East’, 96–97.

74

H. Kennedy , *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (Longman: Harlow, 1986); F. Donner , *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981) 100.

75

A. Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (Oxford, 1955) 627–628.

76

See Howard -Johnston, *Witnesses*, 463 for Islam's alleged power as a ‘whole faith’.

7. Conclusion

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Abstract

Current historiographical trends have demonstrated a tendency to mystify the success of the seventh-century conquests, placing an emphasis on the role of religious fanaticism in overcoming the Roman and Persian Empires. This concluding chapter argues that the approach to the sources developed over the previous chapters, together with a longer-term, frontier studies perspective, suggests that there was a far less numinous process at play. The two falls of Rome in Late Antiquity involved phenomena far more similar to each other than has, in general, previously been suspected.

KeywordsRomeIslamLate AntiquityConquest

This study set out to bring a sociological nuance to the history of what conventionally have been called the Islamic Conquests of the seventh century. Implicit throughout has been the warning of the great American scholar of Islam, Marshall Hodgson, that ‘however a civilisation be defined, it must not be hypostatized, as if it had a life independent of its human carriers’.¹ This book was inspired, first and foremost, by the extreme divergence between the modern historiography of the seventh-century invasions and the often self-conscious complexity of studies of the Germanic invasions that destroyed the West Roman Empire two centuries before the humbling of the Roman East. The subject of the seventh-century conquests is vast and it should go without saying that such a short study cannot but graze the surface of many of the profoundly complex problems the period poses. Summaries of complex concepts, phenomena, and concise synopses of important, occasionally hard to reconstruct events have been necessary to advance the argument intelligibly. The book’s treatment of aspects impinging on the origins of Islam might also seem

secular and revisionist to an extent that could surprise specialist scholars of both Late Antiquity as well as dedicated Islamicists.

This has not, however, been without reason. It has recently been said that the outbreak of the seventh-century conquests 'cannot possibly be explained in terms of ordinary historical processes'.² Yet it is apparent that it can. Critical and novel re-evaluation of the sources suggests that the conquering armies, like the Germanic invaders, recruited an ultimately unknowable but probably significant number of their fighters on the march. It is deeply improbable that these men knew much about Muḥammad or his message, and the explicit attestation of Christians in the ranks of the invading armies shows that it was not necessary to do so. The power of Islam, in its nascent, uncertain, and unsettled state, cannot therefore be said to have erupted onto the world as a force entirely like no other, turning men into fearless, fanatical warriors. When the written sources of the Islamic tradition give that impression, they do so as a reflection and a response to a later, settled, self-confidently Islamic society that could imagine no other version of history.

The 'Muslims' who were made on the march, moreover, came from the frontier lands of Rome and Persia. These open, rolling spaces had been dominated by federate Arabian groups and, latterly, federate proto-states, for generations. The human disparity between invader and frontiersman, on an ethnic level, was probably negligible. The ecology of Arabia had always brought disparate groups into contact and, by the seventh century, language and customs were likely shared over vast spaces, as was probably a basic monotheism given the spread of Christianity in inner Arabia and across the Syrian steppe, a phenomenon evident in the Miaphysitism of the Ghassān. Just like the Roman federates who 'went over to their fellow tribesmen' in Theophanes, the various individuals attested in the sources who joined the invading army were probably little different to those already serving within it in the eyes of any external observer.

Theophanes' account of the defection of the Roman federate group is by far the most important example of how the success of the conquering armies can be located in the dynamics of the imperial frontier. One should not be misled by the Islamic tradition to root 'the fundamental causes of Islam's success...within Arabia...rather than in the developed lands of the north'.³ The warriors who issued out of the Ḥijāz were unable to match Roman power on their own at Mu'ta. They were only able to break through and to ravage Palestine with the experienced manpower of Rome's erstwhile federate forces, who had little reason to remain loyal to an empire that could no longer pay them, and whose officials bore towards them the prejudice born of half a millennium or more of imperial pre-eminence.

It appears that the federates chose to join their fellow Arabians to seize what they were owed by the sword, rather than allowing themselves to remain the ‘dogs’ (κυσὶ) of an imperial eunuch. It is anyway hard to imagine that Roman power was anything more than a nominal force in a region that had been controlled by an occupying army for around fifteen years. The recent Persian occupation was itself likely to have eroded traditional allegiances. It is also hardly impossible that some of the Arabians who expected once again to be paid by Rome had taken service with the Persians when that other great empire was in a position to need fighting men to protect its new possessions or to reinforce its armies.

Quite simply, the success of the conquerors must have bred further success as they proved that Rome could no longer guarantee the security and integrity of her provinces. Everyone likes to be on the winning side. The message of Muḥammad may therefore be thought of as the ideological force that came fitfully to solidify and to strengthen a coalition that was underpinned first and foremost by some other kind of social cohesion, which may as well be termed ethnic given the likely importance of language and the tendency of the frontier to foster identities separate from those of the imperial interior and more similar to those of the peoples beyond. This would help to explain why a faith that came to present itself so self-confidently is so absent from the first decades of the new power, which was, for instance, for a long time content to use the coinage it inherited from the empires rather than to mint new money proclaiming the prophecy of Muḥammad .

Ultimately, the men who made Islamic civilisation possible are claimants of the same paradox as are the various peoples that emerged in Europe in the dying days of the fifth century. They were both a product of, and the force that destroyed, the old order of the ancient world, as expressed in the empires of Persia and Rome. Islam, therefore, can be considered not just the philosophical fulfilment of Late Antiquity , but also its conclusion in very human terms.

Footnotes

1

M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilisation, Volume One, the Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago & London, 1961) 34.

2

J. Howard-Johnston , *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010) 448.

Ibid., 526.

Chronological Appendix

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284 Accession of Diocletian, often given as the start of ‘Late Antiquity’

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363 Emperor Julian invades Persia

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568 Lakhm inscription

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1

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